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**Beyond Tragedy: Genre and the Idea of the Tragic
in Shakespearean Tragedy, History and
Tragicomedy**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this work, which has not previously been published or submitted for any other degree or professional qualification, excepting only that some of the ideas referring to fathers and children in my reading of *King Lear* in the latter part of Chapter 1 appeared in early form within the thesis submitted for the degree of MSc by Research at the University of Edinburgh: "Tragic Fathers, Tragic Children: Paternal Violence, the Male Infantile Imagination and the Sceptical Quest for Identity in Five Plays of Shakespeare."

Fionnuala O'Neill

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection between the study of Shakespearean drama and the theory and practice of early modern dramatic genres. It reassesses the significance of tragedy and the idea of the tragic within three separate yet related generic frames: tragedy, history, and tragicomedy. Behind this research lies the fundamental question of how newly emerging dramatic genres allow Shakespeare to explore tragedy within different aesthetic and dramatic contexts, and of how they allow his writing to move beyond tragedy.

The thesis begins by looking at Shakespeare's deployment of the complex trope of "nothing". "Nothing" as a rhetorical trope and metaphysical idea appears across many of the tragedies, often becoming a focal point for the dramatic representation of scepticism, loss and nihilism. The trope is often associated with the space of the theatre, and sometimes with the dramaturgy of tragedy itself. However, it is also deployed within the histories and tragicomedies at certain moments which might equally be called tragic. "Nothing" therefore provides a starting-point for thinking about how the genres of history and tragicomedy engage with tragedy.

Part I focuses on tragedy, including extended readings of *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*. It explores Shakespearean drama as a response to the pressures of the early modern cultural preoccupation with, and anxiety about, scepticism. Stanley Cavell and other critics of early modern dramatic scepticism have tended to locate this engagement with scepticism within tragedy. However, this section shows that the same sceptical problematic is addressed across Shakespearean dramatic genres, with very different results. It then explores why scepticism should display a particular affinity for tragedy as a dramatic genre.

Part II focuses on history, with particular reference to *Richard II* and *Henry V*. The trope of "nothing" is used as a starting-point to explore the intersection between Shakespearean history and tragedy. Engaging with Walter Benjamin's theory of baroque tragedy as *Trauerspiel* (mourning-plays) rooted in history, it argues that *Trauerspiel* provides a useful generic framework against which to consider the mournful aesthetic of Shakespeare's histories.

Part III focuses on early modern tragicomedy and *The Winter's Tale*, asking how Shakespeare achieves the transition from tragedy to tragicomedy in

his later writing. It explores tragicomedy's background on the early modern stage in theory and practice, paying particular attention to Guarini's theory that pastoral tragicomedy frees its hearers from melancholy, and to the legacy of medieval religious drama and its engagement with faith and belief. Returning to the trope of "nothing", this section shows that *The Winter's Tale* addresses the same sceptical problematic as the earlier tragedies. Arguing that scepticism opens up a space for tragedy and nihilism in the first half of *The Winter's Tale*, it demonstrates that Shakespeare finds in the genre of tragicomedy an aesthetic and dramatic form which allows him to move through, and beyond, the claims of tragedy.

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Preface

Genre, as a way of thinking about literature, had largely fallen from critical favour by the 1970s. This decline is traceable as far back as the rise of Romanticism, which often regarded anything that smelt of neo-classical austerity and literary “rule” with deep suspicion. In addition, the Romantic notion of “genius” tended to suggest that works of literature arose as unique objects in and of themselves, passing over notions of context (literary, social, political, or economic) and conditions of production. This was essentially the view of Croce, who remarked in his influential *Aesthetic* of 1902 that every work of literature is unique and fractures genre as it comes into being, extrapolating from this to argue that genre criticism violates the uniqueness of a work. To this distrustful and anti-authoritarian view was added the charge of genre’s irrelevance, as the rise of modernist literature increasingly sought out ways of representing the formless and fragmentary.

The 1970s and 80s saw the arrival of several sustained apologies for genre, among them a series of lectures by Rosalie Colie (published posthumously as *The Resources of Kind*), an article by Tzvetan Todorov, a monograph by Heather Dubrow for the New Critical Idiom series, and Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature* (an account of Renaissance genres and modes that argues forcefully for the continuing relevance of genre today). Influenced in some instances by the theoretical interest in Saussurean linguistics and structuralist criticism, these critics together showed that genre should not be understood as a set of rules (although some genre-theorists, including early Renaissance ones, have argued to the contrary) but suggested that it functions more like a linguistic code or means of communication. Rather than understanding genre as a means of classifying works, we should think of generic conventions more as “horizons of expectation” (Todorov 163), allowing individual works to establish meaning. As Derrida points out in “The Law of Genre”, modern works also operate within and across generic boundaries, even if those boundaries do not belong to the ancient genres, and for a work to shatter or transgress the limits of the law a sense of some form of limits must exist in the first place.

One of the most important arguments to emerge from this defence, especially in the work of the Renaissance specialists Colie and Fowler, was a new

awareness that if we wish to understand works historically, we ignore genre at our peril. Without an understanding of generic frames of reference, of these cultural fields of discourse, it is impossible for us to understand much of what Renaissance writers and audiences would have understood themselves to be writing and hearing. Without this, we stand little chance of hearing much of the dialogue between a work and its fellows, to understand how individual works function in and against particular frameworks, or in what sense particular works might have understood themselves to be in dialogue with other traditions and cultures ranging from classical tragedy to medieval vernacular drama. It is in this sense, as Colie suggests, that genre-systems act as “a set of interpretations, of ‘frames’ or ‘fixes’ on the world” (*Resources* 8). All genres are irredeemably historical: they are always cultural, relative and historically-contingent. It was on a plea of genre’s historical significance that both Rosalie Colie and Alastair Fowler introduced their defence of its value as a critical frame of reference. They both asserted that without a fuller understanding of the history of kinds it is impossible for us adequately to understand the interconnections between works, or fully to comprehend the significance of the endless and self-conscious generic allusiveness with which Renaissance writing is filled – the tragic buskin; the comic sock; the pastoral reed – to understand more about how writers felt themselves to be in dialogue with different traditions and cultures. In this sense, an understanding of genre is in absolute accordance with the aims and ideas of new historicism: only by learning more about the actual conditions of writing, and the cultural and literary or dramatic frames of reference, can we approach more nearly the task of speaking with the dead, to reach a fuller and more sufficient understanding of what they might have seen and heard in the plays that still speak to us in very different settings and contexts today. Genres are not, like Platonic Ideas, eternally fixed, though Renaissance genre-critics might have argued differently – and often did. Rather they change and evolve within different periods and cultures; in dialogue with, rather than in opposition to, actual literary or dramatic practice.

One of the crucial functions of genre is the particular aesthetic shape or form it gives to its material content. Looking at Shakespeare, it is immediately clear that many of the same preoccupations and concerns extend across the body

of his dramatic works, irrespective of genre. Many of the basic premises or events are very similar: several revolve around the suspicion of infidelity, for example – sexual anxiety being a rich vein of comic and tragic energy – but this is itself part of a wider discourse of suspicion and mistrust concerning the basis on which relations with others can be established; how to distinguish truth from falsehood and fantasy or illusion from fact. It emerges in the widespread preoccupation across Tudor and Renaissance literature with the difference between what seems and what is: smiling villains; treacherous mistresses; fickle figures of Fortune; all of them potential material for profoundly tragic *or* comic writing. The generic fluidity in Shakespeare's writing reflects this: we only have to place *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline* alongside one another to see that this basic material slides easily into different genres, each of which retain in themselves the traces, echoes and possibilities of very different stories and endings.

A particular experience of uncertainty provides the basis for my exploration of genre here. It is an experience which might be thought of most fully as the consciousness of separation: a gap or absence opening up between the subject and the availability of his surroundings. This separation appears under different guises: at various points the separation between a man and his friend; a husband and his wife; a father and his children; a son and his parents; a king and his divinely-invested power; a Christian and his God; a subject and his world. The representation is not, of course, unique to Shakespeare, nor to the many other dramatists and other literary authors who were his contemporaries. Skelton's *Bowge of Courte*; the sonnets and satires of Wyatt and Surrey; Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: these are only a tiny number of examples of works in which a similar consciousness of separation and instability becomes the basis for sickening uncertainty, tragedy, or political satire. But if suspicion and misrecognition themselves provide material for satire and comedy, the sharpness of separation is more often tragic. It is certain that such separation is a kind of loss, but of what nature? Exploring this experience of separation in Shakespeare under the name of scepticism, Stanley Cavell refers to the moment as the "withdrawal of the world" (*Disowning* 19). Lucien Goldmann found something very similar in Racine, exploring it in relation to the scepticism of

Pascal and the *Deus absconditus*, the god who has withdrawn from the world to an unreachable remoteness, neither present nor absent but a sleeplessly watchful eye. Walter Benjamin read it as the melancholy of historical life unfolding after the Fall and the withdrawal of the full divine presence. He found in European baroque tragedy a response to a crisis of representation that was simultaneously the natural state of human language and other such forms of representation after the sundering of word and thing, and yet also the product of a particular historical moment as the Reformation increasingly saw forms and ceremonies emptied of their meaningful ability to gesture beyond themselves to the remote divine presence. All of these accounts respond to the preoccupation found in many early modern European tragedies with a crisis of loss in which the precise degree of separation is uncertain: a surrounding world or divine presence has withdrawn, but where to and how far is unknown, perhaps unknowable. Neither fully present nor fully absent, the world and its subject exist in a state of liminality with regard to one another.

For Cavell, Goldmann, Benjamin and many others this experience is a tragic one, and they find in early modern tragedy a particular aesthetic form that dramatises and responds to the despair of such a loss, such a separation. Of these three accounts, however, Benjamin's is particularly suggestive: differentiating between classical and early modern tragedy, he argues that early modern tragedy is rooted in the experience of historical life, the unfolding of the time of history, becoming a form of *Trauerspiel* (mourning-play). Although Benjamin does not specifically differentiate between tragedies and history plays, his mention of *Richard II* and *Richard III* alongside *Hamlet* and the tragedies of Caldéron indicates that his understanding of Shakespearean tragedy at least is heavily influenced by plays that today we tend to find straddling two different generic frames; one ancient, one very new. What difference might it make to read this representation of separation as a function of history, rather than of tragedy? How might the newly emerging form of the history play offer a different aesthetic in which to explore such a consciousness of separation, and how might such an understanding of historical life as itself a form of separation inform readings of other history plays, themselves not usually read as tragedies?

Equally, representations of such scepticism and separation occur not only in the tragedies but in the comedies and tragicomedies: the tragic rage of Lear, Othello or Timon at their loss of faith in the world is reflected in the furious responses of Claudius, Leontes or Posthumus Leonatus. If the worlds of tragedy and comedy are often anxiously near to one another, then it seems that this sceptical problematic concerning the separation of subject and world opens up a space for tragedy here, glancing at the tragic and nihilistic possibilities that are fully realised in the tragedies, only to avert or move beyond them in the comic plays. In looking first at tragedy, then at history and finally at tragicomedy, this thesis sets out to explore how the aesthetic and formal qualities of two new dramatic genres encounter and explore very similar tragic moments in new and productive ways.

The rhetorical trope of “nothing”, which reappears at crucially sceptical moments across the tragedies but also within moments in the histories and tragicomedies which might be called tragic, provides a starting point in the thesis for thinking about how this experience of loss, absence, separation and liminality is encountered within different generic forms. Each section has its own introductory chapter, which explores and opens up that particular genre, before continuing on to more extended readings of particular plays. Part I draws upon readings of *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* to suggest that a particular paradigm of tragedy as nihilism (the movement from all to nothing) dramatises one response to which this sceptical encounter lends itself. Part II draws upon Benjamin’s understanding of early modern tragedy as *Trauerspiel* to suggest that history as a genre explores the sceptical encounter with “nothing” differently, becoming part of an aesthetic of mournfulness. It begins with a reading of *Richard II*, a cornerstone between tragedy and history, before turning to *Henry V* to suggest that, while the play is not tragic, an understanding of its underlying traces of scepticism helps to make sense of the moments of mournfulness that seem at odds with the play’s ostensibly triumphal mood. Finally, turning to tragicomedy, the thesis explores the ways in which scepticism and “nothing” open up tragic possibilities. Here, the first chapter explores the way in which three of the late comedies pave the road to tragicomedy before turning to an extended reading of *The Winter’s Tale* to explore how this new genre allows

Shakespeare to encounter the tragic possibilities of scepticism within a new generic frame. In exploring the constituent concerns and approaches of differing genres in this way, the thesis seeks to show how new generic forms allow moments of tragic scepticism to be encountered in alternative ways and with alternative responses. Drawing on Benjamin's idea of history as mournfulness, and on early modern ideas of tragicomedy as plays for the melancholy, it suggests that generic form is crucial to the way in which a response to such scepticism is negotiated. If a certain paradigm of tragedy allows a nihilistic response, and history a mournful one, then tragicomedy as an aesthetic and dramatic form encounters and recognises the tragic possibilities of scepticism before moving through and beyond the claims of tragedy.

Part I: Tragedy

Introduction

King Lear is famous as a tragedy of extremes: extremes of emotion, of language, of cruelty and of loss. Like *Timon of Athens*, which Shakespeare wrote in collaboration with Middleton around the same time as *Lear*, and which displays various striking similarities with its more famous contemporary, this is tragedy at its most cataclysmic. As with many others among the tragic plays, their fundamental dramaturgical structure is rooted in a vast reversal of fortune, a plunge towards calamity. These plays push to its extremes such a vision or paradigm of what tragedy is, staging a polarised vision of *all* and its reversal to *nothing* and culminating in a vision of absolute and earth-shattering loss. In the case of *King Lear* the extremity of this loss caused the play's absence from the English stage for one hundred and fifty years, exiled in favour of Nahum Tate's revised "happy ending" version. Dr. Johnson famously found Cordelia's death intolerable, and his reaction speaks for countless other readers and viewers, many of whom have echoed with varying degrees of bewilderment and outrage his question: *why* does Cordelia have to die? Within the transhistorical field of tragedy, *Lear* has come hold a place not dissimilar to classical works like *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Trojan Women* or *The Bacchae*: tragedies that push to the limits visions of apparently endless suffering, loss and nihilism.

In one way, when Shakespeare writes tragedies like *Lear* and *Timon* he is simply exploiting the available models of tragedy as many other dramatists have done before and since, exploring how a particular understanding or paradigm of what tragedy is and what it can do might allow depictions of suffering to be given shape and aesthetic form. Today, when we think about the dramatic genre of tragedy, our thinking is still fundamentally influenced by a vast critical tradition which stretches back to Ancient Greece, locating its origins in the writings of Aristotle and his followers ancient and modern. All of the major contemporary critics whose work contributes to the field of tragic theory today are to some extent writing in dialogue with this tradition. According to Aristotle's seminal exposition in the *Poetics*: "A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself...with incidents

arousing pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*], wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (2320). The action thus represented displays a reversal [*peripeteia*], a change in fortunes, as well as a discovery or recognition [*anagnorisis*], which is a change from ignorance to knowledge: "The finest form of discovery is one attended by reversal, like that which goes with the discovery in *Oedipus*" (2324). Aristotle argues that this tragic reversal comes about in the representation of a great fall, in which a man neither strikingly good nor strikingly bad plunges from a position of prosperity and high reputation into great misery. In this sense, the underlying dramaturgical movement of "all to nothing" looks very much like a fundamental tragic pattern or structure as Aristotle would have understood it.

This classical theory of tragedy continues to shape many of the ways in which we still think of genre today, and in many ways it seems to bear a striking resemblance to the shape of many of Shakespeare's tragedies. The question of how far concepts such as catharsis can inform our understanding of Shakespearean tragedy, and of Renaissance tragedy more widely, is something of a critical problem; several major critics including Gilbert Murray, H.D.F. Kitto and more recently Adrian Poole and John Kerrigan have brought Shakespearean tragedy into sustained dialogue with its Greek forebears, but they tend to focus more upon the trans-historical literary parallels which can be drawn, and upon how the plays seem to speak to each other, than upon the thorny question of how and in what ways Shakespeare might have been directly influenced in his writing by an awareness of Greek or Aristotelian models. Among other factors, we cannot be certain whether or not Shakespeare would have been familiar with Aristotle's writings, either in one of the vernacular translations which were by now circulating around Europe, or in the original Greek. Nor can we be certain to what degree he would have been directly familiar with Greek tragedy at all. However, it is certainly true to say that the basic structure of a dramatic reversal of fortune from good to bad is a fundamental part of the structure of classical tragedy, both Greek and Roman, and that Shakespeare would have been familiar with it at least in its Roman (principally Senecan) incarnation, with its emphasis

on tyranny, power and its abuses, and the often destructive power of the passions.¹

Scholars of Renaissance genre theory and dramatic practice differ on the relative influence upon Shakespeare's writing of the various literary traditions of the tragic, as well as upon the question of exactly how they might have been transmitted to him (for example in the original, in translation, or indirectly through their influence on other playwrights like Thomas Kyd, who was heavily influenced by Senecan revenge tragedy in his writing of *The Spanish Tragedy*). In one corner stands G.K. Hunter, who largely dismisses the influence of classical tragedy upon Shakespeare in favour of medieval narrative traditions; in the other Robert S. Miola, who argues that the Senecan influence can be found everywhere across the dramatist's work.² Timothy J. Reiss points out that the idea that European Renaissance writers somehow remade tragedy and tragic theory from their discovery of Greek tragedy and the *Poetics* is false in any case, as tragedy was known throughout the Middle Ages from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, as well from various other scholarly and grammatical writings including a Latin translation of a gloss on the *Poetics*. G.K. Hunter also argues that Elizabethan dramatic practice as it appeared on the stages of the playhouses is "not easily brought into focus for us by the statements of Renaissance literary criticism, reflecting as it does a heterogeneous literary and dramatic tradition rather than the "precepts of authority", as Continental drama had a greater tendency to do" (248).

Alongside classical tragedy, the other tradition exerting a major and highly visible influence upon the Renaissance understanding of tragedy was the medieval *de casibus* narrative tradition. *De casibus* tragedy takes as its material the exemplary falls of great men, providing a salutary illustration of the turn of Fortune's wheel. It is exemplified in John Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes*, itself derived from Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, from which the tradition gets its name, as well as by the ubiquitous and highly influential Renaissance

¹ For a detailed account of the Senecan influence on Shakespearean drama and the different ways in which the Senecan influence might have been transmitted, see Robert S. Miola.

² See G.K. Hunter, "Seneca and the Elizabethans". Robert S. Miola's *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy* is an explicit attempt to refute Hunter's position.

collection *A Mirror for Magistrates*. Shakespeare knew both of these, and drew upon them for source material. Marlowe's tragedies frequently make reference to this tradition, as in *Doctor Faustus*' exposition of its tragic material. "Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,/ And burned is Apollo's laurel bough/.../Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall" (Epilogue 1-4). Mortimer in *Edward II* is a less heroic protagonist, but he makes even more explicit the underlying imagination of the fickleness of Fortune and the insecurity of power, albeit with defiance rather than fear or regret.

Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel
There is a point, to which when men aspire,
They tumble headlong down; that point I touch'd,
And seeing there was no place to mount up higher,
Why should I grieve at my declining fall? (5.6.59-63)

Widely though these two tragic traditions differed in thematic, formal and stylistic terms, both could be said to incorporate a tragic pattern involving this reversal from a situation of plenitude – whether expressed through power, sovereignty, wealth, contentment or otherwise – to one of catastrophic deprivation and loss. In this sense, the dramaturgical reversal which appears and reappears in Shakespearean dramas like *Lear*, *Timon* and *Coriolanus*, and which allows the first two to stage visions of nihilism unprecedented in Shakespeare's earlier tragedies, does indeed resemble something inherited from the heterogeneous literary imaginative tradition surrounding Renaissance ideas of tragedy. It draws upon and pushes to the limits a particular model of tragedy based on a momentous movement from the heights to the depths which in these plays becomes a movement from *all* to *nothing*.

Strikingly different in many ways, *Lear*, *Timon* and *Coriolanus* share a number of particular characteristics. All dramatise a violent and abrupt reversal in the fortunes of a "great man" (or in the case of *Lear* two great men, as Gloucester's fate doubles Lear's). Following this reversal, all stage a period of exile into the wilderness which is at least partly self-impelled (of these, *Coriolanus*' is apparently the most forced, but his defiant cry of "I banish you!" (3.3.123) makes clear that the self-alienation, if not the physical exile, is claimed as a deliberate act). And in all three, the protagonist goes into exile giving voice to extreme and furious disappointment in the world he leaves behind, howling

for apocalyptic vengeance as payment for this disappointment. Of the three, it is *Lear* and *Timon* that most fully realise this nihilistic vision. They are tragedies of endless loss, and in them there is no relenting: stripped of everything they have and reduced to a horrifying *nothing*, their protagonists go to the grave still crying out for revenge on a world cast as betrayer. “*Timon is dead, who hath outstretched his span,/ Some beast read this, there does not live a man*”, reads Timon’s gravestone (5.4.3-4), and Lear ends his life crying out against the world that has deceived and betrayed him, to a circle almost silenced by his reproof: “A plague upon you murderers, traitors all” (5.3.267). The world, and its treacherous gods, has been tried and found wanting. It is *inadequate*. But these plays give the lie to Coriolanus’ angry cry, because there is no world elsewhere. There is no final recourse, and no obvious way either backward or forward. “Lips, let sour words go by, and language end”, Timon says in his final lines (5.2.105), and in Lear’s lament for Cordelia language does at last fracture, finding its end in an unanswerable question (*why* a dog, a horse, a rat, but not her?), and finding no words for that grief and rage but a long animal howl.

Tragedy and Scepticism

This vision of nihilism and horrifying loss arises out of the radical scepticism exhibited by *Timon* and *Lear*: scepticism about the possibility of placing faith in protestations of love by one’s friends or one’s beloved daughters; about the fragile condition that separates *all* from *nothing*; about what fundamentally separates “unaccommodated man” from the beasts, or his gods from cruel and wanton boys. It is part and parcel of a widespread and productive encounter with Renaissance scepticism which takes place not just throughout Shakespeare’s own works but across much of the English drama of the time. Philosophical scepticism, which was rediscovered during the Renaissance, originates in Ancient Greece: it focuses on the question of whether certain knowledge of any kind is available. The magisterial accounts of the history and reception of scepticism in early modern Continental Europe by Richard Popkin and Charles Schmitt describe the rediscovery and circulation of classical texts concerning ancient Greek scepticism which led to a revival of interest in the subject by humanist scholars including Giordano Bruno, Gianfrancesco Pico della

Mirandola (nephew of Giovanni), and, most famously of all, Montaigne.³ Renaissance scepticism was profoundly affected by this revival of classical philosophy, but the sceptical sphere of influence was far from purely academic. Scepticism as a philosophical discipline interacted and developed in conjunction with other, more immediate areas of inquiry and debate both intellectual and vernacular. In this way, it also came to have a widespread impact upon the literature and thought of the period. Popkin provides a powerful and detailed account of what he terms an European “crisis of scepticism” in the Renaissance, the result of an encounter between rediscovered philosophical scepticism and the widespread religious uncertainties of the Reformation. His survey suggests that this sceptical crisis manifested itself in three main arenas: the scholarly circles of the humanists, the theological debates of the Reformation, and the developing scientific research of the period.

More recently, in a study of the reception of scepticism in Renaissance England and its interaction with the drama of the time, William Hamlin has argued strongly that to Popkin’s three “arenas” should be added a fourth: “popular literature, especially in plays for the popular stage” (120). Critics of English Renaissance drama have long recognised that the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries reflects and explores the sceptical preoccupations and anxieties of the age. Occasional specific references to the philosophical writings circulating at the time appear: the 1604 quarto of *Doctor Faustus* includes a direct quotation from Sextus’ *Against the Mathematicians* (1.1.12), while Jonson’s *Volpone* makes comic reference to a current fashion among English writers for prolific borrowing from that most sceptical of Renaissance philosophers, “Montaignié” (3.4.90). But just as Renaissance scepticism’s sphere of influence goes far beyond the academic and philosophical, so the kinds of scepticism which

3 Two major configurations of sceptical thought existed in ancient Greek thought. “Academic scepticism” develops from the Platonic *Nihil scio*, holding that no knowledge of any kind is possible. “Pyrrhonian scepticism” maintains to the contrary that it is impossible to know for certain whether or not any knowledge is available, recommending instead the total suspension of judgement on questions relating to knowledge. Both of these sceptical traditions were rediscovered and revived during the Renaissance. The chief source for Academic scepticism was Cicero’s presentation of it in his widely-read *Academica*, while the rediscovery and publication of Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Mathematicians* in the 1560s led to a widespread engagement with Pyrrhonian scepticism, most famously within the writings of Montaigne.

we find in the drama of the period reflect a rich multitude of sceptical modes, perceptions and anxieties. The belated arrival of Continental sceptical thought in England, including copies of rediscovered classical texts on scepticism as well as contemporary humanist commentaries on and responses to these, co-incided with a period in which English drama was flourishing. The English theatres thus came to act as experimental spaces in which a recurring, serious and productive encounter took place with sceptical modes of thought ranging from the philosophical and the religious to the popular and vernacular “common-sense” scepticism of the day.

Probably the best-known and still the most influential account of Shakespeare and scepticism appears in the work of the American critic and philosopher Stanley Cavell in his 1986 collection of essays: *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (recently reprinted with a seventh essay added). For Cavell, Shakespeare’s plays interpret and reinterpret a sceptical problematic summed up as “the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it” (*Disowning* 3). Following through with this reading, he finds within Shakespearean tragedy the powerful articulation of a particular sceptical crisis anticipating the same sceptical problematic confronted by Descartes a generation later.

My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes’s *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes. However strong the presence of Montaigne and Montaigne’s skepticism is in various of Shakespeare’s plays, the skeptical problematic I have in mind is given its philosophical refinement in Descartes’s way of raising the questions of God’s existence and of the immortality of the soul. ... The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. (*Disowning* 3)

The groundlessness which results from this kind of questioning of the existence of the world and of one’s place in it is a kind of precipitous sceptical vertigo, the experience of watching the world become suddenly unavailable because unknowable, of feeling the grounds of one’s own existence drop sharply away. Cavell perceives a fundamental relationship between this particular sceptical

paradigm and tragedy, finding that the sceptical response to such vertiginous groundlessness is characterised by an intrinsic and problematically violent nihilism.

Tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism – as I now like to put the matter...tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of; that, for example, Lear's "avoidance" of Cordelia is an instance of the annihilation inherent in the skeptical problematic, that skepticism's "doubt" is motivated not by (not even where it is expressed as) a (misguided) intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge. ... The study of tragedy can and should entail reconceptions of what drives skepticism – of what its emotion is, of what becomes of the world in its grip, its stranglehold, of what knowing has come to mean to us. (*Disowning* 5-6)

The nihilism that Cavell sees as inherent in the sceptical problematic is therefore cast as a vengeful response to what he sees as a feeling of *disappointment* at the world's (and the self's) finiteness, the belief that such finiteness must be inherently inadequate. The affinity that he sees between tragedy and scepticism is thus more to do with a certain kind of sceptical response: the refusal to accept that the ordinary and finite kinds of knowledge available might be adequate.

Interestingly, although he sees early modern dramatic scepticism in very different terms from those of Cavell, Hamlin also discerns a particular affinity between scepticism and tragedy. For Hamlin, this is because he finds at the heart of tragedy many of the same preoccupations that scepticism exhibits: questions of knowledge, perception and judgement and their often crucial importance. Clearly he is right about this, but I am interested in the fact that these same preoccupations also frequently appear in, and are of crucial importance to, the non-tragic dramas. The same series of event-and-misguided-response occurs in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Winter's Tale* as in *King Lear*, causing all three dramas to slide dangerously close to disaster, yet only *King Lear* ultimately ends in tragedy. Clearly, then, the kind of problematically nihilistic sceptical response which is made in all three dramas has a close affinity with tragedy, but the "sceptical problematic" staged in each is not inherently tragic. The question which lies at the heart of this first foray into genre, via tragedy, is therefore to ask what it is that tragedy as a dramatic genre – the shape and form of tragedy –

can tell us about the nature of this threat, and about the nature of tragedy as a *response*. If tragedy represents a certain form of avoidance – or if a certain kind of avoidance is tragic, or is material for tragedy – then who or what is being avoided, and why should it produce a response which falls so easily and naturally into the shapes and structures of tragedy in its available models on the early modern stage?

Tragedy and Modernity

The question of how particular early modern dramatic genres allow different responses to be made to the sceptical problematic is fundamental to the kind of exploration of Shakespearean drama that these chapters undertake. But it is also true that tragedy, as a genre, has always lent itself to critical conversations that seek to discover more about “us”, “our” preoccupations and difficulties, as well as, often, more about the kinds of unthinking violations and acts of violence of which “we” are no longer conscious, precisely via an engagement with the separateness and alterity of other historical periods and cultural moments. There are certain preoccupations that tragedies of other times and other moments share, even if that is, as Terry Eagleton suggests, reduced to something as basic as a negotiation of the certainty of death (*Sweet Violence* xiii). One of the striking aspects about Cavell’s work is the way in which his account of Shakespearean tragedy as avoidance, as a failure of recognition or acknowledgement, informs his understanding of modern (and especially American) culture, and in particular its tragic acts of violence and of evasion. Looking briefly at some of the ways in which the field of tragedy has moved in similar directions, shifting increasingly towards an understanding of tragedy that is informed by the *form* that it gives to our encounter with suffering and horror, it becomes clear that various critics of tragedy beyond Shakespeare and beyond Cavell have also begun to explore the idea of tragedy as *avoidance*, or failure of recognition.

Tragedy and Tragic Theory

Born on the Athenian stage in the fifth century B.C., tragedy is the aesthetic and dramatic form in which Western civilisation has most customarily represented acute suffering and anguish; the form in which it undertakes its most sustained and direct engagement with extreme visions of fear and horror. Any attempt to think seriously about tragedy, to acknowledge it as a medium in

and through which to engage seriously with such anguish and horror, must always return to consider the fundamental question of “what tragedy is”. As with any dramatic genre, this task is one which must necessarily remain in dialogue with the historical moment in which particular tragedies are born, the products of their own particular literary and dramatic – as well as cultural and political – moment. The boundaries of tragedy, and our understanding of what tragedy is, are not fixed but constantly shifting; historically-determined, permeable and subject to critical dispute. As Alastair Fowler remarks of genres: as soon as any rule is established, an example may be found that disproves that rule. Tragedies end in the death of the tragic protagonist, we might suggest, but not in the *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Tragedies end badly, we might suggest more confidently, but not in the *Eumenides*. Even the suggestion that tragedy as a literary form is dramatic is open to challenge: how should we understand *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* or *Breaking the Waves*, if not as tragedies? Nor is this question of tragedy’s boundaries confined to a purely literary consideration. Outside the aesthetic sphere, in the course of ordinary conversation “tragedy” often implies little more than the fact of extreme human suffering. Any one of the following events might be described as a tragedy on the news: a natural disaster such as a hurricane or famine after crop failure; an explosion resulting in loss of life in a factory accident or during a military conflict; the death a child after neglect or in a road accident. The term also appears even more colloquially: a particularly ill-timed sports injury or the disastrous outcome of a match might be described, albeit usually with some discernible irony, as “tragedies”. As Terry Eagleton has remarked: “In everyday language, the word ‘tragedy’ means something like ‘very sad’” (*Sweet Violence* 1). As a term, “tragedy” has become progressively more adjectival, increasingly interchangeable with the word “tragic” to describe any event that provokes a serious and sorrowful response.

Achieving a satisfactory idea of “what tragedy is” may be deeply problematic, but there are profound implications both literary-critical and political to this blurring of the boundaries between our understanding of “the tragic” as it applies to everyday life, and “tragedy” as a dramatic genre. The fact that tragedy finds its roots in drama raises inevitable questions about its form and content; the nature of the suffering portrayed and the aesthetic form in

which this is presented. This relationship dominates critical discussion, no matter how much critics may – and frequently do – disagree about the relative weight which ought to be given to each. When considering the material content of tragedy, George Steiner and Timothy J. Reiss both indicate a belief that human suffering which is truly “tragic” in nature must by definition have “no possible resolution” (Reiss, “Renaissance Theatre” 17). In similar vein, Steiner satirises the modern tragedy of Chekhov and Ibsen when he comments ironically: “More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to *Oedipus*” (8). However, both critics agree that tragedy as a dramatic genre gives aesthetic form and orderliness to the chaos of tragic suffering which is its content, even if they argue strongly that it does not, and cannot, account for the presence of such suffering nor find in it either resolution or redemption.

Man is ennobled by the vengeful spite and injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent, but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame. Hence there is in the final moments of great tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespearean or neo-classic, a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit. No other poetic form achieves this mysterious effect; it makes of *Oedipus*, *King Lear*, and *Phèdre* the noblest yet wrought by the mind. (Steiner 10)

What Steiner’s provocative thesis, *The Death of Tragedy*, therefore proposes is not only an austere view of what tragedy is, in literary terms; it also sets forth a Nietzschean view of tragic suffering as “ennobling” or affirmative of man’s superiority over his gods, a celebration of the defiance of the spirit of “man” – even as it emphasises his helplessness; the futility of any attempt at averting that tragedy.⁴ What this view suggests is that tragedy is always a matter of inevitability.

⁴I repeat Steiner’s term “man” deliberately here, not to suggest that Steiner is in any way uninterested in the sufferings of female characters, but because – Antigone, Electra and Phèdre herself notwithstanding – he omits to pay much attention to any of the significant ways in which they suffer *as women*. The narrative of heroic suffering and resistance is always part of a very masculine story, by assumption rather than due to any conscious critical decision, in which men and (hu)mankind are roughly interchangeable. It is this kind of critical attitude which has sometimes led feminist critics to dismiss tragedy as part of a phallogocentric, right-wing critical tradition which focuses on kings, gods and heroes to the exclusion of women, ordinary citizens, and other groups. For more on the role of women in classical tragedy see Nicole Loraux.

Such a view has been hotly contested during the last century, especially by those who see at the heart of tragedy and its accompanying critical tradition a dubious belief in the aesthetic and moral value of human suffering which claims to be apolitical when it is in reality ideological. Certain modern playwrights, including most notably Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, resist tragedy because they see in it an aestheticization and legitimation of human suffering as “noble”. More recently, the Marxist critics Terry Eagleton (*Sweet Violence*) and Raymond Williams have both sought to reclaim the term. These two refuse to recognise any substantial division between the dramatic art form of tragedy and the everyday experience of tragic suffering. While they share with Brecht and Boal a view that to term suffering “tragic” is to aggrandize or even fetishize it, they also argue that to persist in an artificial division between literary and real life affliction is to deny seriousness or validity to the everyday sufferings of millions by suggesting that because they are not “tragic” they are somehow less important.

However, this position also brings its own problems. Introducing a collection of essays on *Rethinking Tragedy* (2008), Rita Felski sets out an argument which by implication opposes, or at least wishes to qualify, Eagleton’s claim that any attempt at a definition of tragedy which tries to go beyond “very sad” is doomed to failure and is therefore pointless.

Revisionary criticism, as well as traditional criticism, must confront the task of delimiting its object; a category made infinitely elastic because of nervousness about exclusion will soon be depleted of effectiveness as an analytical tool. ... [T]he word “tragic” is often used in everyday speech to describe a wide span of accidents, calamities, and mishaps, from the trivial to the catastrophic. But “tragic” is also an aesthetic term that refers to a distinctive forming of material; here it describes not just suffering but a particular shape of suffering. (10)

There are other, additional pitfalls into which such a squarely and avowedly political theory of tragedy as Eagleton’s can slip. Olga Taxidou suggests that to disregard, as Eagleton wishes to do, the formal aspects of tragedy is to overlook crucial dimensions of theatricality and performance, reducing it to pure philosophy or metaphysics. By resisting Eagleton’s uncompromising approach to the division between dramatic genre and everyday experience, she therefore

hopes not to excise the political dimension of tragedy, but instead to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of the encounter between the politics and the art of tragedy. “In this way the emphasis on performance, rather than resorting to a schematic, or post-structuralist formalism, hopes to reinstate a reading of tragedy that sees the aesthetic inextricably linked with the political” (7).

The wish to qualify Eagleton’s and Williams’ call for a greater blurring of the boundaries between literature and everyday life is therefore not necessarily to suggest a return to Steiner’s avowedly apolitical position. Recently, critics including Gabriela Basterra and Jennifer Wallace have, like Taxidou, warned that to accept unquestioningly a reference to an event as *tragic*, especially by the authorities or the media, is to slide dangerously close to denying all responsibility for it. They cite examples of the problematic application of the term, including the case of mistaken identity which resulted in the fatal shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes by police on the London Underground in a botched anti-terrorist operation (Wallace 1), as well as the loss of military and civilian lives during an outbreak of US “friendly fire” in Iraq (Taxidou 1). While endorsing Eagleton’s and Williams’ laudable attempt to resist the downplaying of mass sufferings simply because they seem less aesthetically pleasing or “ennobling” than the allegedly more romantic and aristocratic sufferings of the powerful, Taxidou therefore begins by sounding a warning note about how far we should endorse this term in its popular or vernacular usage. “Indeed, this use of the term ‘tragedy’ to mean something inevitable, transcendental, beyond our reach or control expresses the received view of the term as one that negates history and political responsibility. At the same time, it adds an aestheticising tone to an event that has specific political causes and effects” (1). In this, Gabriela Basterra agrees.

In our present world we often resort to the tragic mode of arranging experience in order to give sublime sense to traumatic events. When we interpret a particular event (genocide, a terrorist attack) as tragic, however, we ultimately justify it by reference to a transcendent agency. By extricating that traumatic irruption in our lives from its historical context, by declaring it ineluctably imposed on us, what we ultimately do is occlude our own involvement in the decision-making process that led to so much suffering, as well as to our own responsibility for its outcome. (1)

What Basterra thus suggests is not dissimilar to Cavell's position: she too effectively argues that tragedy is a form of avoidance, being designed to keep an aestheticizing distance between spectator and spectacle, and to avoid the necessity of recognition and acknowledgement (of responsibility, of culpability, of the conditions that first *made* tragedy inevitable). It forms part of her larger, more ambitious project, in which she argues that modern subjectivity is structured by tragedy, structuring itself in relation to sources of tragic power such as Fate, the Law, the Name of the Father, the gods, and so on. Paradoxically, then, for Basterra the subject's adoption of "tragic guilt" is in reality an avoidance; in adopting tragedy, the subject refuses to see the guilt of the very structures by which he or she is constituted. Thus tragedy becomes a refusal of an ethical recognition, out of fear that recognising the unethical nature of these structures in relation to which he or she is held in place will result in his or her undoing. For Basterra, the "tragic death" is fundamentally opposed to the "ethical death", and her project explores the idea of tragedy, not as a matter of inevitability, but as a matter of a certain response.

It is with this idea of a particular paradigm of Shakespearean tragedy as a response that I want to turn now to *King Lear* and to *Timon of Athens*, exploring the nature of the sceptical threat that they respond to, and asking what the forms and shapes of tragedy as a dramatic genre can tell us about the way in which this threat is received and responded to, before going on in Parts II and III to explore how other dramatic genres allow for alternative encounters to become possible. One of the questions, then, concerns what the form of tragedy can tell us about what makes this response tragic, about what makes such a vision of nihilism *become* inevitable. Sketching the way in which tragedy emerges in these plays from out of a dialogue with other generic forms and traditions, I want therefore to suggest that these, two of the most *tragic* of Shakespeare's tragedies, are the more tragic precisely because they retain in themselves the traces of other genres and other possibilities. In *Timon*, I want to suggest that the tradition of satire contributes to the process of dramatic alienation, while in *King Lear*, that the possibilities of tragicomedy, not finally realised, heighten the tragedy

precisely because of the awareness of the close relationship between tragic and tragicomic endings.

Chapter 1: *King Lear*

“Nothing will come of nothing.” – *King Lear*

“This nothing’s more than matter.” – *Hamlet*

Ex nihilo nihil fit: Tragedy and Nihilism

I would like to begin with nothing, to see what comes of it.

There is a rhetorical trope of “nothing” which appears and reappears across the corpus of Shakespearean drama. The word itself appears some 654 times across Shakespeare’s plays and poems, with 637 of these occurring in the dramatic works (“Nothing”).⁵ Among these, many are entirely casual and invested with no particular significance. But in a considerable number of instances, “nothing” starts to achieve a peculiar rhetorical resonance, becoming a richly suggestive term. Nowhere is this more evident than in *King Lear*, in which a sustained preoccupation with the idea of nothing famously underscores both the language and the dramaturgy. “Nothing, my lord”, Cordelia replies to Lear when he asks her what she can speak of her love to gain his greatest favour, and astounded at her words, he responds, “Nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.87-90). The play will persistently return to this resonant rhetorical trope, scrutinising and calling into question Lear’s words to ask what the significance of nothing might be, and what – if anything – might come of it.

In one sense, what arises seems a great deal more than nothing. Out of the “nothing” that Cordelia articulates, and Lear’s catastrophic response to it, arises the entire dramatic action of the tragedy itself, precipitating the famously nihilistic downward spiral into which the play descends. The king’s furious pronouncement sends a series of shockwaves reverberating across the play, setting into motion a whole chain of events that will lead ultimately to a vision of absolute nihilism that, with the exception of *Timon of Athens*, goes beyond anything Shakespeare has previously staged. *Nothing* becomes the focus and articulation for a vision of infinite horror and endless, cataclysmic loss. “Edgar I nothing am”, declares Edgar (2.2.192) as he disrobes to transform into the Bedlam beggar Poor Tom, the sight of whom will cause Lear to reflect bleakly: “Is man no more than this? ... Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (3.4.101-06). Nothing will

⁵ The source for this figure is the Open Source Shakespeare online concordance.

come of nothing, the old king insists, and in a sense, nothing *does*. In one way he is right, but not quite as he envisages; out of nothing the play will generate a frightening vision of nihilism, stripping Lear, Gloucester and Edgar to the bone and beyond, stripping them of eyesight, sanity and dignity, reducing them (in Edgar's phrase) to nothing. Of all the Shakespearean tragedies, only *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* stage such an extreme vision of nihilism: unaccommodated man stripped and grief-maddened on a bleak and storm-battered heath; as a naked exile raving in a hole outside the city walls; as an old man staggering toward death under the unresponsive weight of the *last* daughter, in whose lament the language of grief is reduced to a long animal howl.

Within the Shakespearean corpus, *King Lear* is not alone in finding the trope of nothing rhetorically present at the very core of its action. In one prominent example, Shakespeare chooses to term one of his plays *Much Ado About Nothing*, affirming that at the heart of the comedy lies a non-event, an absence. Most prominently and literally, this title refers to the turmoil over Hero's chastity, which is caused by the deceitful charade at her window staged by Don John, and by the disastrous response of those who witness it and misinterpret what they see. We know from report that what Claudio and his friends see, although not exactly *nothing*, is simply an anonymous female figure at a window; a tableau; an illusory piece of theatre designed to deceive. However, what is generated from it is, as in *King Lear*, a great deal more than nothing and a great deal more than it warrants. This event gives rise to the rest of the comedy, which from this moment begins to spiral perilously towards catastrophe.

Yet another example of Shakespeare's "theatre of nothing" appears in *The Winter's Tale*, near the beginning of the play. "Is whispering nothing?" demands Leontes (1.2.284), gazing with fascinated horror at his wife and Polixenes murmuring together as the monstrous fictions of his diseased imagination begin to take shape. These whispers may indeed signify nothing of what Leontes imagines, but out of them emerges a whispered, fantastical winter's tale, a "sad tale.../ Of sprites and goblins" (*The Winter's Tale* 2.1.25-26). In one of its rhetorical manifestations then, nothing becomes the stuff from which dramatic action arises. If, contrary to Lear's assertion, nothing does have creative possibilities, then what Shakespeare generates from it is neither more nor less

than theatre itself, insubstantial yet potent, swelling forth from the zero-shaped “wooden O” of the Elizabethan playhouse (*Henry V* Prologue 13).

In placing the trope of “nothing” at the heart of the action, these plays simultaneously affirm and deny its significance. Claudio and his friends make *Much Ado* about the sight of a female figure seen conversing with a man at Hero’s window, yet it is only a charade, only the maid Margaret innocently impersonating her mistress. Hermione’s whispers to Polixenes do not signify the extramarital affair of Leontes’ imaginings, rather than the mere nothings of a polite hostess which he himself has ordered her to speak. Cordelia may respond with a verbal “nothing” in public, but her love for Lear is not therefore negated. A disparity exists between what is at stake in these events in themselves (a malicious prank; a whisper made at a husband’s request; a daughter’s refusal to speak to order) and the significance with which they become invested (sexual and social betrayal; marital infidelity; the total absence of filial love). Yet they drive the dramatic action; it is around them that entire plays are constructed. In this sense, “nothing” increasingly takes on a formidable significance of its own. From these non-events unfold great dramas – tragic, comic or tragicomic – in which much is at stake: lives and loves; marriages and friendships; personal and national allegiances. And yet a profound scepticism also emerges about their significance, about what might separate these dramas from the comic charades and whispered stories which they stage. In them, sixteen years of suffering can quickly become nothing, just a winter’s tale, “told by an idiot, full of sound and fury”. Signifying – nothing (*Macbeth* 5.5.27-28). When Macbeth draws this “Life’s but a walking shadow” comparison between life and theatre, it is theatre’s potential for swelling forth to encompass everything, every aspect of life and love, tears and laughter, before suddenly collapsing back into nothing which makes the comparison tragic. This is not simple annihilation; rather it is an emptying out of significance. It recalls the scepticism of *Hamlet*. “What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (2.2.303-08).

This skill for taking *nothing*, causing it to swell into a crucial *everything*, and then reducing it once more to nothing, to a quintessence of dust, is one way in which the theatre of nothing lends itself easily to tragedy. And yet this apparently “tragic” reversal, this reduction of all to nothing, occurs across the genres, including tragedies, histories, comedies, tragicomedies and romances. Taking as a paradigm the three examples of Shakespeare’s theatre of nothing in *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Winter’s Tale*, then it is immediately obvious that only *King Lear*’s nothing generates tragedy; the nothings of *Much Ado* and *The Winter’s Tale* ultimately produce comedy, or tragicomedy. “Nothing” is frequently disruptive in these plays: *Much Ado* and *The Winter’s Tale* are both plays which recognise with great clarity their alternative generic possibilities, the ease with which they might tip towards tragedy. Yet ultimately, what nothing generates is not tragedy but theatre, indicating that while scepticism may open up disturbing possibilities, possibilities for tragedy, it is not in itself always a matter for tragedy and nihilism. The list of examples of plays in which this sceptical “nothing” opens up disturbing possibilities includes not only more-or-less “straight” tragedies such as *Timon*, *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* but also the history play *Richard II*, generically problematic plays such as *The Winter’s Tale*, usually thought of now as a tragicomedy, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, whose comic status we do not even qualify with the modal prefix “tragi-” and which is not normally included alongside the so-called “problem plays”. This leads to the logical conclusion that the rhetorical trope is not, as it might appear, inherently tragic, although it does appear to lend itself most easily and prolifically to tragedy. And so this raises questions about what the nature of this rhetorical device might be, why it seems tragic yet is not inherently and inevitably so, and what light it might shed on the nature of the tragic in Shakespeare. The trope of all or nothing is rhetorically and dramaturgically present in *Richard II* as it is in *King Lear*, but what might it mean here to regard this particular instance of all and nothing as part of the rhetorical expression of a tragic history, rather than simply as an historical tragedy? Again, the trope is centrally present in *The Winter’s Tale*, yet here it does not result in tragedy but in comedy or, as it is now more commonly understood, in tragicomedy. So a certain set of questions arise again: what is implied in this trope, what relationship does it bear to tragedy, to

history, and to comedy or tragicomedy, and might it be able to shed greater light on the complex question of dramatic genre, as a response to a particular sceptical problematic?

From Sidney onwards, critics of Renaissance literature have always been keenly aware that writers of the period do not tend to respect strict generic boundaries. Following in the footsteps of the groundbreaking studies of Renaissance literary kinds undertaken by Madeleine Doran, Northrop Frye and Rosalie Colie, Susan Snyder's *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* and Stephen Orgel in "Shakespeare and the Kinds of Drama" explore the ways in which Shakespeare frequently draws on comic types and conventions, playing with audience expectations, and examining the effects this kind of generic mixing can have upon the drama. For example, both critics take *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* as significant examples, arguing convincingly that both pairs of lovers in these plays exhibit many of the characteristics (situational and personal) of lovers from romantic comedy. Snyder argues that the arbitrariness of the tragic catastrophes in Shakespeare, the fact that in several cases the deaths – such as those of Desdemona, of Romeo and of Cordelia – need not have happened at all, contributes to a bleak sense of absurdity which heightens rather than reduces the tragedy. Looking at *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, Orgel suggests something very similar.

Much of their dramatic force derives from the way they continually tempt us with comic possibilities. ... At innumerable points in both plays, had anything happened differently, the tragic catastrophe would have been averted. *Othello* particularly teases audiences in this way – as the famous story about the man who leapt from his seat, furious at the impending murder of Desdemona, and shouted "You fool, can't you see she's innocent?" reveals. ... Thomas Rymer's analysis of *Othello* is perverse and insensitive; but his rage at the play constitutes an absolutely authentic response. Conversely, I think that *Measure for Measure* tempts us with tragic possibilities. (122)

The possibilities of different endings are present in many, if not most, of Shakespeare's plays, but these alternative possibilities do not always have exactly the same effect. The troubling possibility that Hero, Hermione and Perdita might not have made their miraculous returns from the dead lurks behind the final scenes of reconciliation. Conversely, the possibility in the final

scene of *King Lear* that Lear's wild hope might be answered, that Cordelia might live again, that she might at last speak something, is a chance which would "redeem all sorrows" (5.3.264) and which maintains the play's potential for tragicomedy (a potential which it inherits from the source play *King Leir*, and which Nahum Tate would exploit once again in his 1681 adaptation *The History of King Lear*). It is ultimately this hope, unfulfilled, which heightens the final tragedy when amid the finality of death, Cordelia fulfils her early promise and says – nothing. Nothing is pregnant with different possibilities: just as Cordelia *might* have said something at last, so Hero, Hermione and Perdita might *not*. The possibilities of alternative endings trouble the laughter surrounding comic resolutions, but they tend to heighten rather than modify the agony of the tragic dénouements.

How, then, do these dramatic possibilities start to emerge in the first place? Nothing will come of nothing. And yet this nothing is strangely fertile. It generates; it breeds. Out of nothing comes the illusion, comes storytelling, comes theatre. The "nothing" which is produced is potent, and often ugly, as Leontes discovers.

Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh - a note infallible
Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? Noon, midnight? And all eyes
Blind with the pin and web but theirs; theirs only,
That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?
Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing. (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2. 282-94).

Leontes' speech vividly depicts not only the rhetorical potency which nothing can achieve, but also strikingly illustrates some of its most threatening characteristics. Lear's "Nothing will come of nothing" gestures by its very denial toward the potential for nothing's generativity *and* for nihilism. In the same way, Leontes' speech illustrates firstly how an apparent nothing can blossom with incredible generative rapidity into *everything*, an unseen wickedness all the more monstrous for being unnamed. Over the course of just a few lines, the stakes leap

from a whisper to the fate of “the world and all that’s in’t”. A monstrous narrative of wickedness, all the more horrible for its intangibility, its unnameability, springs from the seed of the nothing Leontes sees; is this not something more than nothing? And yet the power of this grotesque creation lies in its paradoxical ability to annihilate, to make a nothing of all creation, of *everything*. At a stroke Hero will be reduced to nothing in the eyes of her father and her lover, ruined by a charade, a mere nothing. Whispering may be nothing but it almost kills both Hero and Hermione; for Mamillius it will prove most mortal. Leontes anticipates the truth of Lear’s prophecy: what will come, be created, from nothing is – *nothing*. The generative power of nothing is threatening because it can produce a monstrous birth, whose all-consuming power is to swallow up the world, to reduce it to nothingness.

This concern about the generativity of nothing emerges, not from nothing, but from a much wider Renaissance discourse spanning science, philosophy and divinity. Lear’s words achieve even greater resonance for being echoed almost word for word later in the play: “Why no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing,” he repeats to the Fool (1.4.130). The repetition sounds a little glib, perhaps, as if the king is repeating a truism or popular saying that he expects his audience to be familiar with, to nod along to. And, to a degree, that is exactly what this is. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* is a classical idea, one that spans various related spheres of discourse from science to natural philosophy. Parmenides mentions it in the surviving fragment of his poem *On Nature*, and Plato discusses it with reference to Parmenides in *The Sophist*. Following Plato, Aristotle takes it up in the *Physics*, and it reappears again later in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*. These classical philosophers were sceptical of the idea of nothing; sceptical that “nothing”, in the sense of a true physical void or total absence of matter, could be truly be said to exist at all within the bounds of the natural universe. It was an idea still current in Renaissance science and metaphysics, both of which remained heavily influenced by Aristotelian theory. Descartes, a prominent supporter of plenism, draws on this tradition in the *Meditation III*.⁶ It was not

⁶ “Now, it is manifest from the natural light that there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect; for whence can the effect draw its reality if not from its cause? and how could the cause communicate to it this reality unless it possessed it in itself? And hence it follows, not only that what is cannot be produced by what is not, by

until the publication of Pascal's *Experiences nouvelles touchant le vide* in 1647, and his subsequent experiments in Paris, that the theory of the vacuum began to be universally accepted within mainstream scientific discourse. Christian theology, whose doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* might at first seem to oppose such scepticism, actually aligned itself fairly easily alongside Aristotelian theory, as Rosalie Colie points out (*Paradoxia* 221). Where Aristotle remained sceptical of the idea of nothing, arguing that any void in nature would be instantly filled with surrounding matter, Christian philosophy explained this idea in theological terms. While God truly had created the world out of nothing, such a void could no longer be said to exist, since the natural universe was now everywhere filled with the presence of its divine Creator.⁷

Lear's assertion thus emerges from out of a much older discourse and preoccupation with the idea of nothing, with the possibility or impossibility of its real existence and its potential for generativity. As Rosalie Colie demonstrates in *Paradoxia Epidemica*, her account of the Renaissance tradition of paradox, it was a concept which was open to question, and increasingly prevalent across various Renaissance fields of thought from science to theology. The concept of *nothing* was not just a matter for physics but for metaphysics, and nowhere more so than in conjunction with this doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, in which the generativity of nothing is most powerfully at stake. Donne displays a recurring preoccupation with the idea in both his poetry and his prose, and often exploits its paradoxical and metaphysical qualities, as he does in the "Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day". The "Sermon Preached at the Spital" gives voice to one of his most extended treatments of the subject.

The drowning of the first world, and the repairing that again; the burning of this world, and establishing another in heaven, do not so much strain a mans Reason, as the Creation, a Creation of all out of nothing. For, for the repairing of the world after the Flood, compared to the Creation, it was eight to nothing; eight persons to begin a world upon, then; but in the Creation, none. ... The less any

likewise that the more perfect, – in other words, that which contains in itself more reality, – cannot be the effect of the less perfect: and this is not only evidently true of those effects, whose reality is actual or formal, but likewise of ideas, whose reality is only considered as objective." (Descartes 100).

⁷ See for example Donne's *Devotions*. "Mere vacuity, the first agent, God, the first instrument of God, nature, will not admit; nothing can be utterly empty, but so near a degree towards vacuity as solitude, to be but one, they love not" (Donne, "Meditation V").

thing is, the less we know it: how invisible, how unintelligible a thing then, is this *Nothing!* ...What then is there that can bring this Nothing to our understanding? what hath that done? A Leviathan, a Whale, from a grain of Spawn; an Oke from a buried Akehorn, is a great; but a great world from nothing, is a strange improvement. We wonder to see a man rise from nothing to a great Estate; but that Nothing is but nothing in comparison; but absolutely nothing, meerly nothing, is more incomprehensible than any thing, than all things together. It is a state (if a man may call it a state) that the Devil himself in the midst of his torments, cannot wish. No man can, the Devil himself cannot, advisedly, deliberately, wish to be nothing. (Donne, *Sermons* 100-01)

This passage gives voice to the sheer scale of the problem both of *nihil* itself and of the paradox of *creatio ex nihilo*, the kind of mental gymnastics the sermonist must undertake in the attempt to grasp such a concept. Not only must the preacher struggle to overcome a sceptical difficulty with imagining the conditions for this generative state of nothing in the first place, but this in itself allows another form of scepticism to emerge. To accept this doctrine, and thus to envision the state of nothing *before* the dawn of the world, requires as Donne says for the Christian believer to imagine himself quite out of existence. The preacher must establish himself in the precarious position of one peering into the void, imaginatively unmaking himself (a state that “the Devil himself...cannot wish”). It opens up space for another form of scepticism: that sudden and disturbing consciousness of what Cavell calls “groundlessness” or “vertigo”, an extreme and destabilising uncertainty regarding the insubstantial grounds upon which the existence of the world is guaranteed and made possible. Alongside the preacher’s discomfiting reminder to his audience of the ease with which the Creator once undid the world he had made, and of the apocalyptic “promised end”, the fragility and precariousness of man’s estate are made unsettlingly clear. Implicit in the sermon are the words of Genesis, words that still appear in the office for the burial of the dead: “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 3:19).

Reflecting and echoing this fearful uncertainty about conditions of origin and the very grounds of existence, “nothing” as a rhetorical trope in Shakespeare frequently becomes the focus of an intense and anguished scepticism, as the sceptic adopts the position of the sermonist peering into the void, acquiescing in

his own unmaking. “Edgar I nothing am”, declares Edgar, while Macbeth remarks that the thought of murder ‘Shakes so my single state of man,/ That function is smother’d in surmise,/ And nothing is, but what is not’ (*Macbeth* 1.3.140-42). Faced with his own deposition, Richard II concludes, “I must nothing be” (*Richard II* 4.1.201). The plays explore what it might mean, in Donne’s phrase, “to be nothing”, to be unmade; through this idea of nothing, the experience of an identity dismantled or “undone” starts to be explored. It echoes the same preoccupation, the same terrifying fragility hinted at in Donne’s sermon: behind the order of the cosmos the shadow of chaos lurks; at the heart of the drama there is a nothing; as men are called into being, so may they be unmade. In the lines from *Richard II*, the king’s impending loss of his crown precipitates him into confronting a critical problem: when his identity has been synonymous with the identity of the sovereign, what happens to that “I”, that self, when the sovereignty is no longer his? For him, the answer is “nothing”: “No, ay”, he says, which for the listening audience is also “No I”, no self (4.1.201). Richard’s lines gesture towards the threatening nightmare of a self that can be literally “undone”, yet does not die.

The shadow that lurks within the trope of nothing can imply a simple lack of existence, but it also carries within its rhetorical folds the implicit idea of absent presence, and therefore of loss. The loss specific to the trope of nothing is a form of *unmaking*: the traumatic possibility of the disintegration of the world and all that’s in’t, even the covering sky itself, returning to the nothing from which it came. “Perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come again”: thus Othello (3.3.90-92), envisaging the unmaking of the cosmos. But Othello has something to tell us about the peculiar character which nothing can start take on here, because at times it has far more in common with the state of Chaos here mentioned than with the simple negation or absence of being. Chaos is not absence of matter but rather unformed matter, the abyss of utter confusion from which the cosmos is formed: contemporaneous writers including Elyot, Bacon, Milton and Hobbes all refer to it in these terms (“Chaos”). The state of perdition to which Othello refers is not the negation but rather the *unmaking* of his cosmos, the return to a primeval state in between absence of being and cosmic order. Like Chaos, “nothing” often comes to represent the

lurking shadow of unmaking, of a descent into disorder: it does not always, in Shakespeare's usage, represent negation, or simple absence of being, but can take on an insubstantial, noumenal quality, sometimes nightmarishly so. To see the world return to chaos is more than to see it simply descend into disorder; it is the *unmaking* of the world, a descent into the gaping void of formlessness.

Exploring this in his essay "Shakespeare's Monster of Nothing", the philosopher-critic Howard Caygill takes as his starting-point Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy in order to explore the strikingly liminal quality that "nothing" sometimes takes on in Shakespeare. Caygill argues that a distinction can be drawn between what he terms the "character of nothing in philosophy" – by which he is principally referring to Hegelian and Heideggerian thought – and Shakespeare's "monster of nothing" (Caygill 105-06). Whereas in Hegelian/Heideggerian philosophy "being" and "nothing" are understood as the only two (polarised) ontological alternatives, Caygill draws attention to the difference in Shakespeare, in which "nothing" is often the basis for a far more indistinct and equivocal state, a liminal state whose very instability has the power to horrify. For Hegel and Heidegger, he argues, not-nothing is the same as being; for Shakespeare, however, not-nothing is a third state, a state which is not the same as being but which is nevertheless thought of in terms of something real and substantial.⁸ Caygill suggests that this state of "not-nothing" can be a state of inauthentic and troubled unfixedness (in Hamlet-esque terms, "not to be", or to be in limbo) which might be eased only by being truly nothing, or in a state of total negation.

To die – to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream - ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. (3.1.60-68)

⁸ This, as Rosalie Colie remarks, is far from unique to Shakespeare, but is implicit in many Renaissance writers' attempt to grasp the paradox of nothing as a concept. "Not only is the logical problem raised, of affirming what is "not", but also, by the affirmation, "nothing" seems to be transformed exactly into "something", a positive entity" (Colie, *Paradoxia* 219).

Death is no more than sleep, but its attraction lies in this imagination of *being no more*, “not to be”, achieving a final end to the inherent pain of existence. The potential for a triple pun on “consummation” is worth noting here: in it an audience might hear echoes of final ending (given additional resonance by the reverberations of *Consummatum est*, with all its associations of a seismic change for humanity), of consumption or devouring, and of sexual consummation (echoing the many other semantic nexuses of Elizabethan English in which climax and annihilation are linked via sex and death, including *will*, *nothing* and indeed *death* itself). But as Caygill notes, this gateway to simple negation rapidly becomes complicated by a liminal, nightmarish state, a sleep troubled by bad dreams, by “the dread of something after death,/ The undiscover’d country” (3.1.78-79). Hamlet’s desire for a dichotomy between being and non-being would create a liberating security, an absolute ontological status, complete freedom from sullied flesh. Yet it becomes rapidly undermined by the shadow of a third, indeterminate state, the nightmarish “something” after nothingness, the undiscovered bourne. The security of absolute nothingness proves elusive and illusory, just as Edgar in *King Lear* makes the brutal discovery that the worst is never here. The threat of “nothing”, although it shares much with the threat of death, is not synonymous with death. Death is something like a dreamless sleep, but nothing is the state of being unmade, reduced to formless matter. Nothingness is infinite, it can never be compassed, and thus is always present as a threat to all levels of being. The stake in this contradictory trope of nothing, is seems, is exactly that of our own ontological status. Like nothing, the state of not-being is characterised by in-betweenness, by dreaming, just as nothing is repeatedly associated with the liminal quality of fiction, narrative and above all of theatre, the wooden O. “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” “Lear’s shadow” (*King Lear* 1.4.221-22).

Caygill’s essay contains some important insights into the particular threat of uncertainty and liminality that emerges in many places within the scepticism for which “nothing” is often the focus (and it is clear from the discourse of nothing that appears across Donne’s poetry and sonnets, and throughout other

Renaissance writings, that this is a widespread preoccupation).⁹ He is right that the plays do not lend much support to the viability of Hamlet's dichotomy "To be, or not to be" (3.1.56): Hamlet's vision of a simple ontological division, being or non-being, becomes complicated by a bad dream, the suggestion of a third stage. The undiscovered bourne threatens a shadowy and indeterminate ontological state. This nothingness is a monstrous force which threatens to swallow up apparently secure and orderly worlds and identities, dismantling and dissolving them into a nothingness which nevertheless is always envisaged, not as Hamlet's peaceful dreamless sleep, but as a horrifying nightmare. The true security and liberation of utter and permanent unconsciousness, of total negation, is never reached. In *King Lear*, the characters are stripped back and further back in a tragedy of loss that is unremittingly cruel, yet they can never quite find relief by plumbing the absolute depths and finding rock-bottom. The play systematically and relentlessly strips back layer upon layer of all that marks out king from man and man from beast. Stripping its protagonists of everything from attendants to clothes, from authority to familial bonds, from eyesight to sanity, the play explores what it might mean to reduce a human being to the point of absolute nothingness.

<i>Edgar.</i>	To be worst, The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune, Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear: The lamentable change is from the best; The worst returns to laughter. <i>Enter GLOUCESTER, led by an Old Man</i> But who comes here? ... O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'? I am worse than e'er I was. ... And worse I may be yet: the worst is not So long as we can say 'This is the worst'. (4.1.2-10; 27-30)
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At the beginning of the play, Lear's polarised distinction rejected *half*, casting the possibilities in polarised terms as *all* or *nothing*. But here, nothing begins to take on a different quality of horror, one that is intimately connected with the same

⁹ For more examples, see chapters 7-9 of Rosalie Colie's *Paradoxia Epidemica*.

experience of groundlessness. The polarised alternatives of the play's beginning have given way to the horror of nothing as liminality, nothing as endless loss. We might compare Macbeth's emerging sense that "To be thus is nothing" (3.1.47), and his subsequent rage against Duncan.

Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, *nothing*
Can touch him further! (3.2.22-26, italics mine)

Rosalie Colie's work draws attention to the way that "nothing" became for various Renaissance thinkers a paradox, an intellectual problem where man is suddenly no longer the measure of all things. What is significant about this is the way that the contemplation of nothing can provoke a sudden sceptical consciousness of the withdrawing of the world, its infinite remoteness. Emerging from out of this rhetorical and metaphysical tradition, this fertile and generative trope as Shakespeare exploits it becomes at various points the focus for an intense and anguished scepticism, in which the withdrawal of the external world becomes a threatening consciousness of liminality, neither being nor non-being. Here, the world is not absent but unavailable, hidden and most secret. It has withdrawn itself, like the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden god of tragedy.¹⁰

It is with this understanding of nothing as a sceptical problem, nothing's potential to open up a world of terror in the shape of uncertainty, liminality and groundlessness, that I want to turn now to *Lear*, to ask how it is that tragedy allows the dramatisation of a particular sceptical response to that threat. It starts with the catastrophic response that Lear makes to Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord". If the same sceptical problematic appears in other plays via this trope, including comedy (*Much Ado*), history (*Richard II*) and tragicomedy (*The Winter's Tale*), I want then to ask how the form of tragedy, its movement from all to nothing,

¹⁰ Lucien Goldmann explores a similar problematic with reference to the writings of Racine and Pascal in his classic study *Le dieu caché*, in which he explores tragedy as a response to 17th century rationalism and scepticism. "The God of tragedy is a God who is always present and always absent. Thus, while his presence takes all value and reality from the world, his equally absolute and permanent absence makes the world into the only reality which man can confront, the only sphere in and against which he can and must apply his demand for substantial and absolute values" (Goldmann 50).

might allow scepticism's affinity for a particular response to be realised, and what can it tell us about what it is that makes that particular response tragic.

King Lear

Of all Shakespeare's familial tragedies, the story of *King Lear* is the most agonising. *King Lear* is "total tragedy": it is the story of extremes, focusing upon the figure of a man who tries to give all and take all, finding anything less than that "all" quite intolerable. The brooding paternal imagination of *King Lear* is trapped in a tragic landscape of absolutes, of total fears and desires. As the play opens, the problem of acknowledgement is introduced almost immediately as Kent asks Gloucester abruptly: "Is not this your son, my lord?" Gloucester, who has pointedly not introduced Edmund, shows his discomfort in an evasive, ambiguous response, replying, "His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge" (1.1.7-8). While his meaning does quickly become clear, he never explicitly acknowledges the illegitimate Edmund as his son, staving off such a public recognition under cover of a stream of banter. He refers to the young man only as "the whoreson" (1.1.22), the son of his mother. This contrasts with his manner when talking of the legitimate Edgar. Gloucester takes immediate verbal possession of him, saying, "*I have a son, sir...*" (1.1.18, italics mine), and never, throughout the entire play, does he once mention Edgar's mother. In spite of his claim that neither son is dearer to him than the other, his obvious shame at being forced to "acknowledge" Edmund (1.1.9) is compounded by his subsequent dismissal of the young man: "He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again" (1.1.31-32). This is hardly the kind of affection shown to Edgar, who Gloucester later claims to love "tenderly and entirely" (1.2.96-97).

This word *entire* is an interesting one. It endorses the play's "all-or-nothing" exploration of love, the entirety of love which Lear demands and Cordelia refuses. But it also retains other, equally suggestive nuances of meaning. Some of the most resonant of the definitions listed by the *OED* include "Complete; constituting a whole; including all the essential parts. In early use also, perfect, containing all that is desirable"; "Of a quality, state of feeling, condition, fact, or action: Realized in its full extent, thorough, complete, total"; "Whole, unbroken, intact; not mutilated or decayed; undiminished in quantity or extent"; "Wholly of one kind, homogeneous; free from alien admixture"; "Of qualities, feelings etc.:

Pure, unmixed”, and finally “Of male animals: Not castrated”. I will return to this final use later. These other usages suggest that the deployment of the single word “entire” can imply several specific but related meanings: perfection, totality, intactness, homogeneity and purity. In this context, the “entire” love for his son to which Gloucester refers suggests a love which claims to be total and unadulterated, all-exclusive – exactly the kind of love, in fact, which Lear demands of his daughters and which Cordelia denies him because it would not leave space for her own marriage, her own wishes and desires. As she pointedly asks:

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
 They love you all? Haply when I shall wed,
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
 Sure I shall never marry like my sisters
 To love my father all. (1.1.99-104)

Cordelia accurately recognises that to yield to her father the kind of entire, all-exclusive love he demands would effectually make her marriage impossible: once her troth is plighted, Lear can no longer be the sole or even the primary object of her affections. This idea of an emotional integrity, violated by the departure of the daughter in marriage, is reflected in the divisive nature of Cordelia’s reply to Lear, in which she maintains that she “must” split her love in half. Lear recognises and fears the opposition between his emotional need to maintain the integrity of his family and his duty to uphold the demands of the social and political order. In introducing the love test, he aims to create a situation in which Cordelia will be forced to make her own marriage impossible. His momentous decision to partition his previously intact kingdom is a divisive act paradoxically intended to bring about unity, an attempt to achieve private integrity by political division. By giving them “all”, Lear puts his daughters under an impossible obligation, creating a debt which they can only pay by giving him their “all” in return. But Cordelia’s response cuts through Lear’s masking device, returning this political scene to its origins within the private familial framework of her impending marriage. She publicly draws attention back to the fact that it would be impossible for that marriage to take place in the light of such an entirety of love required by Lear.

When Lear makes his grand gesture, he flings off all but the name and ceremonials of monarchy to give what is literally his *all* to his daughters: “rule, / Interest of territory, cares of state” (1.1.49-50). “I gave you all”, he tells Regan later, faced with an agonising ingratitude and rejection (2.2.39). “And in good time you gave it”, she flashes back at him ; she refers to his age of course, implying that it was about time he handed over to those younger strengths, but the general suggestion that the gift of Lear’s “all” was not the act of selfless generosity it seemed is powerfully conveyed. And of course she is right, because there are strings attached to Lear’s gift; what he wants in return for his gift is a mere nothing, a speech of love – but as Terry Eagleton remarks, Shakespeare’s nothing has a habit of starting to look like “a sublimely terrifying all...a sinister everything” (*William Shakespeare*, 65), no less than their all in return. Cordelia attempts to deal with this very problem by retreating into the language of economics in a way that recalls the preoccupation of *Timon* and *The Merchant of Venice*, referring to her “bond” of love and filial duty but denying that this bond demands her all.

Cordelia. I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.
...
... Haply when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (1.1.92-93; 100-04)

Lear’s gift of all he has, all he is, to his daughters, effectively demands all that they have and all that they are in return; as Cordelia points out, to accede to Lear’s demand would in practice either render her own prospective marriage a sham if she spoke truly, or render her a flatterer and hypocrite if she spoke false. But the problem goes deeper here: the position with which she is confronted is essentially the problem that even though she *does* love Lear, loves enough to leave her husband and to come and die for him, it is now impossible for her to speak that love without flattering. As *Timon* puts it, “When we for recompense have praised the vile,/ It stains the glory in that happy verse/ Which aptly sings the good” (*Timon of Athens* 1.1.16-18). The fact of Lear’s request, and of her sisters’ response to it, has stained the glory of Cordelia’s happy verse. And, as we

shall see, in *Timon* such a gift becomes an overwhelming of the one to whom the gift is made, a gift that is aggressive in its very attempt to give all and have all, the staking of a claim upon the other that requires no less than her all in reply. In accepting it, that other would be consumed by the giver. Just as Gloucester refuses to recognise Edmund, and later to recognise his part in Edgar, so Lear will not recognise Cordelia, since to recognise his part in her is also to recognise the part of her that is not from him, or part of him, or invested in him. Such a demand for *all* emerges from out of the discourse of entirety that Gloucester's words suggest: an urgent and desperate demand for a bulwark against the kind of radical and corrosive scepticism, the terrifying groundlessness, uncertainty and liminality into which the play will later descend. It demands not only to have, but to *be* all, requiring the world to make itself utterly available to the sceptic's grasp.

Terrified by the idea of sharing Cordelia's affections and the humiliating dependence which that would reveal, Lear experiences her refusal not merely as a rejection but as a violation of the wholeness, the *everything* of that mutually all-in-all relationship that he demands. Retaliating against the violence he feels he has suffered at her hands, he rejects her with equal violence, attempting to cut himself off, denying that any relationship between them exists.

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever. (1.1.114-17)

This attempt at absolute estrangement signifies how totally Lear would like to disassociate himself from his daughter. Attempts at disowning paternity, already hinted at in Gloucester's reluctance to acknowledge Edgar, begin to crystallize here as Lear rejects his "sometime daughter". However, it is not until later in the play that both men explicitly accuse their children of being *not* their children. As Gloucester is fooled by Edmund into believing Edgar a would-be parricide, he says "I never got him" (2.1.78). A little later, Regan says incredulously, "What, did my father's godson seek your life? / He whom my father named, *your* Edgar?" (2.1.91-92, italics mine). Her straightforward enquiry recalls Kent's direct question at the beginning of the play, and is received with similar evasive shame: Gloucester replies "Oh lady, lady, shame would have it hid" (2.1.93). The

unbearable truth is the reminder that these shameful children are indeed his, his sons, his Edgar and Edmund. Lear too responds to filial conflict by trying to disclaim paternity. He asks Goneril “Are you our daughter?” (1.4.209), answering his own question some 40 lines later by calling her ‘Degenerate bastard’ (1.4.245). Upon meeting Regan, he gives her a muted warning of what he will try to do if she treats him as Goneril has done. When she greets him with “I am glad to see your highness”, he responds:

Regan, I think you are. I know what reason
I have to think so. If thou shouldst not be glad,
I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb,
Sepulchring an adultress. (2.2.317-21)

Disowning paternity in *Lear* becomes, in Gloucester’s word, a refusal to “acknowledge” these problematic children. In a later play the sceptical denial will become literalised, as Leontes claims one child absolutely as his own, casting out the other as a bastard. Here the denials remain rhetorical, but they share the same violent rage that Leontes will later display. It is the absolute paternal *all* or *nothing* which attempts to deny and evade the bewilderment, the uncertainty, of recognising these children, recognising their origins and the presence in them of self, and of maternal other, and finally the recognition of their existence as beings at once most intimate and yet most separate. Paradoxically, the call to recognise these children, to “own” them, is the same call to recognise their separateness. Lear’s polarised responses, first demanding Cordelia’s all and then “strangering” her, are two sides of the same coin.

In response, Cordelia’s *Nothing, my lord* is a refusal. It rebukes Lear, confronting him with Cordelia in all her separateness, all the wishes and desires in which Lear has no part. But what Lear sees in it – not a rebuke but a rejection, the withdrawal and unavailability of the other, her ineffable nothingness – is part of another discourse altogether, the discourse of radical scepticism about loss, and liminality, in which the departure of the other beyond the sceptic’s reaching hold, is experienced as the catalyst for a whole world of mutability, instability and groundlessness.¹¹ It will become revealed in the intangible *nothing* towards

¹¹ A comparable experience appears in the earlier poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt. Several times the departure of a woman becomes the focus for an experience of sudden and sickening groundlessness at the withdrawal of the world, its descent into mutability (as in his

which the play moves, the stripping back of everything that holds Lear, Gloucester and Edgar in place: name and rank, eyesight and sanity. “Edgar I nothing am.” But who is he? “Thou art the thing itself”, Lear says (3.4.104), but of course he is not: he is still in disguise, still acting. Who is it that can tell me who I am? Lear’s shadow; the shadow which in Elizabethan phraseology is also that most liminal and intangible of beings, the actor. If Cordelia’s nothing, her withdrawal, is a threat then what it threatens is a recognition: to allow her to draw back in her separateness is to confront the nothing that the play will find at its own heart, the nothing that comprises in itself all the instability and uncertainty and the possibility for *endless* loss that looms behind the play’s most abject terror. “*No worst, there is none*”.¹² And in response to this, striking a desperate blow to ward it off, comes Lear’s own *Nothing*, the violent response to the terror of that awareness. He has sworn, he says, he is “firm” (1.1.247). But standing on the heath, raving at the traitorous world, it is precisely that *firmness* that is denied him. “Here I stand your slave,/ A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man” (3.2.19-20). And the violence of his curse upon it is the sceptic’s frustrated howl of rage, the same violent and punitive impulse behind Lear’s earlier *nothing*, behind Gloucester’s disowning of his sons (and behind the rage of Timon, and Claudio, and Leontes, and Othello, and Posthumus Leonatus, in all those plays in which the violent and nihilistic response of scepticism opens up room for tragedy, if no other way is found). Seeing the availability of that *everything* absconding, in furious disappointment at the inadequacy of *half* it seeks instead the annihilation of the world, its reduction to nothing.

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
...

Petrarchan translation “They fle from me”, quoted below). See Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* for a fuller account of the way in which court politics and sexual politics become intertwined in Wyatt.

“They fle from me that sometyme did me seke
With naked fote stalking in my chamber.
I have sene theim gentill tame and meke
That nowe are wyld and do not remembre
That sometyme they put theimself in daunger
To take bred at my hand; and nowe they raunge
Besely seking with a continuell chaunge.” (1-7).

¹² The line is taken from Gerard Manley Hopkins’ sonnet, “No worst there is none”, which echoes *Lear*.

infantile imperiousness of childhood, the absolute demand for the satisfaction of total maternal devotion which achieves its power, paradoxically, from the position of absolute need and vulnerability from which it is made. Cordelia's attempt to partition her love is received by Lear as a shattering blow to his fantasy not only of omnipotence but of omnitude, of being comprehensively and universally *all*. Janet Adelman argues that Lear's rage is the rage of an infant for whom anything less than total maternal love is "nothing": "in the arithmetic of infantile need, there can be no *some*; anything less than all is nothing" (118). In splitting her love Cordelia splits Lear's very identity, forcibly making him aware that he is separate from her. In making him see that he is not all, she forces him to rediscover the humiliating vulnerability that he would like to deny.

It is the "allness", the "entirety" of such need that sends the play hurtling towards catastrophe. *King Lear* begins with the infantile demand for "all", re-enacting the totality of the infant's need and desire for the mother, and it concludes with the inevitable discovery of eternal separation. The maddened Lear reveals his new, painful awareness of his vulnerability, his neediness, and above all his mortality when he tells Edgar and Gloucester: "Go to, they are not men o' their words: they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof" (4.6.103-04). In other words, the price paid for individuation, for the development of a separate individual identity, is the realisation that one does not comprise the entire world in one's being, that the fantasy of being "everything" was only ever an illusion. Lear experiences this realisation as a betrayal, the feeling of having been lied to. The cost of his individuation is also the recognition of his mortality: he is neither ague-proof nor age-proof, but "a very foolish, fond old man" (4.7.60).

The play's tremendous sceptical anxiety about origins emerges from out of that same discourse of nothing and its generativity explored earlier in this chapter, the struggle with the problem of *creatio ex nihilo* that surfaces in Donne's sermon. Descartes, too, touches on it later in the *Meditation III*.

I am here desirous to inquire further, whether I, who possess this idea of God, could exist supposing there were no God. And I ask, from whom could I, in that case, derive my existence? Perhaps from myself, or from my parents, or from some other causes less perfect than God... But if I [were independent of any other existence and] were myself the author of my being, I should doubt

of nothing, I should desire nothing, and in fine, no perfection would be wanting to me; for I should have bestowed upon myself every perfection of which I possess the idea, and I should thus be God.
(106-07)

The paradox of Descartes' fantasy of parthenogenesis is that it simultaneously allows the possibility of overcoming scepticism, that powerful sceptical longing to be free from doubt and from desire, as the possibility of knowing the world is enabled via the fantasy of *being* that world in its entirety so that the whole world is made available in the self. And yet it is this same desire that opens up the sceptical void, from which the self emerges as its only guarantor, thinking itself into existence, held in place by no external guarantee or certainty. This sceptical fantasy of being free from desire is something that I explore more fully in the next chapter, on *Timon of Athens*. Here, in *Lear*, this preoccupation with origins becomes played out against a vast and terrifying landscape that is conceived in the language of the female body, against which the individual, separate and vulnerable, emerges, and which remains the site of its simultaneous violent fears and desires. The blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* explicitly connects the ability to see clearly, to differentiate, with the sceptical question of a self-knowledge mysteriously contingent upon biological origins. Edgar's assertion to Edmund: "The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (5.3.170-71) verbalises an ideological crux of *King Lear*: fears about male blinding are linked to the fear of a castrating, emasculating violence stemming from the secret female "place" where the male subject is conceived.

As we can see from Donne and from Descartes as well as from Shakespeare, these sceptical fears and uncertainties about the possibility of "knowing" the conditions of origin easily become part of a discourse of generativity and origin. In Shakespeare, the rhetorical suggestiveness of "nothing", that in one of its many linguistic reverberations glances at the female sexual organs, joins forces with the suggestiveness of "knowing", which again provides a rhetorical nexus for ideas of knowledge as physical and sexual union. This "female nothing" in *Lear* is rhetorically co-existent with the "dark and vicious place", the mysterious, guilt-ridden place of origin, the female and maternal site from which the male subject emerges and to which he is drawn, the place from which these children, so unsettling present within their fathers and

yet so shockingly differentiated, have been conceived. Edgar's words to Edmund reinforce Gloucester's earlier attempts at differentiation and redefining boundaries he has adulterously crossed, identifying one son as "his" and the second as "other", "the whoreson" or female creation. But the maternal "place" from which Edmund emerges is intrinsically a place of mixture and *undifferentiation*. Edgar's attempt to relegate Edmund, the illicit and procreative sexuality which begot him and the sufferings of his father to this "dark and vicious place", the mysterious, guilt-ridden place of origin, is an attempt at self-dissociation, just as Lear and Gloucester have tried to escape it in their turn. Simultaneous terror and desire give the imagination of the "place" much of its power: while the place can become a paradise of primal union and female nurture, the unifying death toward which Lear would "crawl" via Cordelia's "kind nursery", and which he visualises once again in his fantasy of the cage he and Cordelia will inhabit together, it can turn with terrifying suddenness to the "sulphurous pit", the "dark and vicious place" in which masculine identity is cut off. Peter L. Rudnytsky argues:

Lear's relations to his daughters constitute a re-enactment of a son's ambivalent attachment to his mother. But, like generational roles, gender roles are extraordinarily fluid in the play. Thus, if Cordelia and her sisters are both daughters and mothers to Lear, and Lear is himself identified with the feminine "nothing" then it becomes impossible to differentiate fathers from daughters, sons from mothers and parents from children. (309)

In other words, the boundaries and divisions which Lear spends half his time struggling to impose and the other half wishing away are disintegrating: separate identity is becoming submerged in the returning primal chaos. Although the unification and refuge in such a chaos proves to have a fearful attraction, the terror of finding no coherent explanations, no clear distinctions between self and hideous other, is also strongly felt. While one imaginative impulse desires to return to the womb, to consume the mother and be consumed by her, there is also a horror of such cannibalism. Goneril and Regan are several times imagined as metamorphosing from women into ravening beasts consuming their father's flesh: Gloucester tells Regan that he has sent Lear to Dover because "I would not see...thy fierce sister / In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs" (3.7.55-57), while Albany calls them "Tigers, not daughters" (4.2.41), and Lear describes

them as “she-foxes” (3.6.20) and as “these pelican daughters” (3.4.62). The image of the pelican daughters is particularly interesting because the pelican is usually imagined as a maternal figure who feeds her children from her own flesh and blood (it is for this reason that the pelican becomes a type of Christ). In a single image, Lear is thus at one and the same time the infant consumed by the daughters who are his mothers, and also the mother consumed by his own offspring. But he does not only imagine himself as a helpless victim of cannibalism but as a cannibal too: significantly, he has previously imagined a paternal figure who consumes his own children, referring to “The barbarous Scythian / Who makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite” (1.1.117-18). These images coalesce into Albany’s apocalyptic view of the cannibalistic chaos to come.

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come:
Humanity will perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (4.2.47-51)

The ravening appetites of the pelican daughters cause them to feed on the flesh that is their own flesh, and there is no differentiation between man and monster. The womb is imagined as a great mysterious mouth of hell (Lear’s “sulphurous pit” of hell and darkness (4.6.124)), the origin from which all life comes, the mouth of the tomb to which all men return. It is the site of primal union towards which Lear strains and the insatiable predator from which he flees. It is the site to which everything Lear and Gloucester fear is relegated, yet the place which they discover to be mysteriously present inside them, subverting their masculine identity.¹³

Janet Adelman suggests that one of the play’s greatest terrors is the male subject’s discovery of the mother within himself. As Lear discovers the presence of the “climbing mother”, the womb, inside him, Edgar sees in his father’s “bleeding rings” two feminised nothings etched on his face. “In Edgar’s image, that is, the father bears the corrosive signs of his concourse with the female; the

¹³ The semantic nexus of nothing also reflects a preoccupation with nothing as a moral category (“naught”), reflecting the concern with nothing as evil, nothing as the mouth of hell. See also Ophelia’s rebuke to Hamlet’s bawdy punning (including his punning on the word “nothing”), with “You are naught, you are naught” (3.2.143).

occluded maternal presence is in effect etched on his face" (Adelman 107). Edgar's assertion that the dark and vicious place has blinded Gloucester explicitly characterises the womb as a place in which the male encounters the danger of an emasculating female violence which threatens to subvert both his sexual and his visual potency. In *King Lear* Shakespeare explicitly conflates blinding, castration and child-loss in the dual fate of Gloucester and Lear, whose journeys from lack of recognition (spiritual blindness) through actual blindness or madness into ultimate recognition (insight) mirror and complement each other. "Nothing" becomes the place where masculine identity is eroded and violently cut off, where the male subject is blinded and castrated. Yet the new insight which Gloucester and Lear achieve is directly linked to their blinded and feminised condition: if the womb is threateningly dark and violent, it is also the place in which they discover a new receptive sensitivity to the world around them, the ability to "see it feelingly".

As I mentioned earlier, the one use of the word "entire", which Gloucester uses to describe his love for Edgar, can mean "not castrated". Although the earliest use cited by the *OED* is from 1799, this meaning resonates with the play's idea that children are regenerative and their loss is castrating. Many critics suggest that the blinding of Gloucester is also a figurative castration (see for example Adelman 107; Nunn 173). The medieval punishment for rape required the rapist to lose his eyes as well as his testicles because the eye was held responsible for inspiring uncontrolled sexual desire (Nunn 172). Gloucester's uncontrolled sexual desire for a visually "fair" woman has led him to commit adultery, copulating in the "dark and vicious place" which Edgar says loses him his eyes (5.3.170-71). The language used of his mutilation also reflects this understanding, for example when Edgar says "in this habit / Met I my father with his bleeding rings, / Their precious stones new lost" (5.3.187-890). Lear's greeting of him too, "Ha! Goneril with a white beard?" (4.6.96) reflects Gloucester's feminised status. It is for this reason that Gloucester cries: "O dear son Edgar .../ Might I but live to see thee in my touch,/ I'd say I had eyes again" (4.1.23-26). The loss of his children has castrated and aged him; the return of the beloved Edgar would once more make him "entire". Similarly, the great storm scene after Lear's rejection by all his daughters expresses his apocalyptic feelings

about the destruction of reproductive powers. Lear's feelings of being feminised, robbed both of his phallic power and of the loving children who were to nurse and regenerate him, causes him to imagine that he has suffered the violence of castration. He imagines retaliating with similar violence, expressing his apocalyptic desire to destroy the entire world, wrecking its reproductive potential. At the end of the play, surrounded by the bodies of his daughters, this is essentially what happens to him, and he appeals to those around him who have what he has lost. "O you are men of stones!/ Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so/ That heaven's vault should crack; she's gone for ever" (5.3.255-57). Dymphna Callaghan points to the phallic nature of the three words "stones", "tongues" and "eyes" here (91-92). Like Gloucester, Lear has been blinded by his loss, castrated and feminised by it. The loss of the children who represented an idealised, intact, perfect and immortal part of the paternal self is experienced as a fundamental, terminal violation of that masculine self. The totality of his need has asked for more than Cordelia can give, and is answered by total loss: such a demand for "all" can only be answered by the absolute nothingness of death.

Seeing nothing: scepticism, theatre, interpretation

One crucial point about Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord" is that it is not identical with what is generated from it. While it rebukes and denies the *all* that Lear demands, it is not Cordelia's words but Lear's interpretation of them, his response to them, that generates the momentous tragedy of nihilism and loss. If *King Lear* casts the landscape in polarised terms, of *alls* and of *nothings*, then what Cordelia's *Nothing, my lord* offers instead is a withdrawal, true, but not a negation. On the contrary, she offers Lear "half" her love. But as the earlier part of this chapter suggests, the sceptical difficulty with nothing as the grounds of existence, the grounds from which self and world are generated and by which they are held in being, is concerned precisely with their liminality, their uncertainty. If Hamlet begins by casting existence in polarised terms – being, or not being – then this is rapidly subverted by the same scepticism, the same threatening liminality about a state of endless, groundless loss and uncertainty, that comes to haunt *King Lear*, as Edgar's cold comfort in the possibility of finding firm ground in *the worst* disintegrates at the sight of his blinded father stumbling on-stage, the play's *nothing* etched in those bleeding rings. So if this

play exploits the dramaturgical possibilities that the shape of tragedy offers, imagining and staging the full horrors of nihilism and groundlessness to which this particular sceptical problematic can give way, then what it gives us is tragedy as a *response* to that threat. If *Lear* shows us, in frightening detail, the kinds of potential monsters that scepticism threatens, then it also shows us how those monsters are generated, just as *Much Ado* and *The Winter's Tale* do. Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord" is indeed a frightening withdrawal of sorts because it denies that Lear is all. Lear's recognition of this later tells us what this means: "They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof" (4.6.118). It is a recognition of his mortality; it is in this way that scepticism is a recognition and acknowledgement of death, as Donne also makes clear.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the resonant *nothing* that underpins *Lear* becomes, in some sense, a figure for the stuff or substance out of which tragedy is generated (something which becomes much clearer when we consider how nothing is present not only as the "wooden O" of the theatre, but also within the Renaissance discourse of the metaphysics of existence, as well as a sexual euphemism for the female reproductive "place"). Reading this trope in *Lear* in the light of other plays in which the action arises out of nothing – *Much Ado*, and especially the monstrous swelling and growing of the fertile and nihilistic nothing of *The Winter's Tale* – might help to think further about the way in which nothing is generated in the first place, and thus, how tragedy arises. The transformative power of nothing here can turn a whisper into adulterous wickedness, hours into minutes, noon into midnight. Like theatre itself, it is at once most generative, most potent, most transformative and yet most insubstantial, "slippery" as Hermione herself in Leontes' fantasy. Hamlet goes some way toward an explanation of these contradictory qualities: "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-50). If the events of a drama or a tale are nothing in themselves, a charade just like the one witnessed by Claudio and his friends, then it is in the eyes and ears of the audience that they will take on their significance, being found either sweet or bitter. "Nothing" may be interpreted – or misinterpreted, as it is by the furious thinking and overthinking of Lear, Leontes and Claudio. A Gentleman in *Hamlet*, speaking to the Queen of Ophelia's madness, tells her: "Her speech is nothing,/ Yet the

unshaped use of it doth move/ The hearers to collection" (4.5.7-9). The act of thinking about or of speaking nothing can move, can transform. As the grief-stricken Laertes remarks, listening to Ophelia's insane ramblings, "This nothing's more than matter" (4.5.171). This hints at a potent concept of nothing which is not limited to the simple state of non-being. The nothing (the wooden 0) of the playhouse produces nothing *real*, but it does produce an illusion, a figure of the imagination, which is not nothing and which assumes its transformative power in association with its reception and interpretation by its audience.

In this way, nothing sometimes becomes the focus of a theatrical moment that confronts an audience with the sceptical problem of other minds, the often frustrating and sometimes threatening opaqueness of the other which defies the desire to penetrate and to know. This meaning is powerfully present in those sceptical moments in Shakespeare in which this opaque other becomes gendered female. Time and again, the issue upon which the plays tip dangerously towards tragedy is that of loss of faith in a beloved woman, whose body is figured as dangerously, threateningly invisible, as it is in *Much Ado*. The theatre audience recognise the irony of Claudio's attack "Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it" (4.1.56): his attack upon the trustworthiness of visual evidence (caused by the sight of the innocently blushing Hero) is prompted by his reliance upon other visual evidence (the sight of the false Hero talking to a man at her bedroom window). One might recall here Othello's fierce demands of Iago about Desdemona's supposed infidelity: "give me the ocular proof"; "Make me to see't" (3.3.363, 367); answered by Iago's coolly maddening response, "where's satisfaction? / It is impossible you should see this" (3.3.404) and his goading query, "Or to be naked with her friend in bed / An hour or more, not meaning any harm?" (4.1.3-4). Just as Iago points out to Othello the impossibility of ever knowing beyond all doubt that Desdemona is false to him, so Claudio unconsciously flags up the impossibility of trusting his eyes where Hero is concerned: the "ocular proof" of her guilt – the sight of her talking to a man at her window – would not have proved her to be sexually unfaithful, even had it been the real Hero whom he saw. Her blushes, here the sign of her innocence, depend upon the interpretation of the witness for a meaning, and are transformed by him into the stamp of her infamy.

The problem that confronts Lear is the same that confronts Leontes, and Claudio, and indeed Othello and Timon: how, upon these shifting and uncertain grounds, is a man (because in Shakespeare, it is always a man) to achieve any degree of sure and certain knowledge upon which he can ground his relationship with the external world, and all the others in it? In certain of its manifestations, nothing therefore becomes the focus of a sceptical problem. The question being posed here is this: how, within the experimental lab of the theatre, does one – or might one, or even *should* one – go about the business of *seeing nothing*? In an essay on “Shakespeare’s Nothing”, David Willbern suggests that the business of seeing nothing has a particular affinity with the theatrical space and modes of representation.

“The quality of nothing,” according to Gloucester, “hath not such need to hide itself. Let’s see,” he commands Edmund, who is displaying his forged letter by obviously concealing it. “Come, if it be nothing I shall not need spectacles.” (*King Lear*, I.ii.32-35). Gloucester looks at the letter, but does not see that it is nothing; a hoax. Only when he is blind, cruelly enlightened, does he finally see nothing. Paradoxically, for us to see Shakespeare’s Nothing we do need spectacles, or rather a spectacle: the play of nothing in Shakespeare’s theater. His tragedies enact somber scenes in such a spectacle. They are Renaissance No-dramas. (244)

Further on, Willbern follow up this opening gambit by returning to the specific importance of the theatre for this liminal, intangible quality. ““O” is the germinal image of Shakespeare’s stage. Shakespeare’s O, his Nothing, thus becomes a dialectic, circumscribing the theatrical mode (what is actually onstage) and the imaginative mode (what is represented to and in the minds of an audience)” (256-57). In these generative environs, the audience are invited to gaze at nothing and to watch as before their gaze it unfolds and bodies forth into a tremulous and unstable “not-nothing” (something which incidentally also responds to the paradoxical and puzzling mathematical properties of nothing as zero). Willbern also points out the aural pun, more audible to Elizabethan ears than to our own, upon “noting”. “That is, “nothing” would have sounded like “noting” (hard “t”). So that *noting* (knowing, naming, or designating) coexists with and represents the awareness of *nothing*” (Willbern 249). To note something is therefore to signify it in some way; to go about the business of

seeing something, and to undertake an act of interpretation by investing it with significance and with meaning.

The quality of nothing as it appears here is in itself fluid; it seems to invite interpretation. The on-stage events out of which these three dramas grow, in themselves signify nothing at all. It is in their interpretation, or misinterpretation, that they gain their dramatic significance, as Borachio points out in *Much Ado*.

Borachio. I think I told your lordship, a year since, how much I am
in the favour of Margaret, the waiting-gentlewoman to Hero.

Don John. I remember.

Borachio. I can, at any unseasonable instant of the night, appoint
her to look out at her lady's chamber-window.

Don John. What life is in that, to be the death of this marriage?

Borachio. The poison of that lies in you to temper. (2.2.12-21)

Claudio and his friends make *Much Ado* about the sight of an anonymous female figure seen conversing with a man at Hero's window, yet it is only a charade, only the maid Margaret innocently understudying her mistress. What they see is in itself nothing; the poison of it lies elsewhere, in their acceptance of Don John's interpretation. The charade at the window is a piece of metatheatre, encouraging the audience to think about the nature of theatre and spectatorship, of how it is that a dramatic something may be constructed from nothing. Cordelia may refuse to speak the lines written for her, but her love for Lear is not therefore negated. It is in Lear's interpretation that her silence becomes a declaration of pride and untenderness. The handkerchief which Othello sees is a mere square of cloth, not the ocular proof of adultery, and the whispering of Hermione and Polixenes is similarly opaque, not the clear-cut grounds for suspicion which Leontes finds them to be.

As the dramas suggest, this theatrical-imaginative dialectic often creates deeply problematic results. Nothing generates this imaginative dialectic by its considerable power of suggestion: its secretness gestures opaquely in the direction of crucial, hidden truths. Faced with the infuriating opacity of Cordelia's nothing, of Edmund's letter, Lear and Gloucester erupt into acts of interpretation which are also acts of violence. Nothing invites the gaze of the spectator: it invites the seeker-after-knowledge to grasp it and penetrate its mysteries, just as Gloucester, his curiosity whetted, seizes the letter and rips it open, convinced that in so exposing it to the eye he will put an end to the mystery. Much later in

the play, Edmund unknowingly recalls this scene as he opens the letters found on the body of Goneril's messenger Oswald. "To know our enemies' minds we rip their hearts,/ Their papers is more lawful" (4.6.255-56). More lawful, perhaps, but not always with any greater degree of success. "Let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Lear asks wistfully (3.6.73-75). The imaginative pull of bodily dissection in as a road of knowledge appears many times elsewhere: "I'll tent him to the quick", Hamlet says gorily (2.2.593); and, bitterly, "you would pluck out the heart of my mystery" (3.2.356-57). In one sense, this obsession with bodily interiority echoes the increasingly prevalent interest in early modern England about the opening up of the human body, whose secrets were being uncovered in the relatively new dissecting theatres, often open to public view and very popular. Jonathan Sawday points out that the early sixteenth to seventeenth centuries witnessed the rise of a culture in which the opening of the human body was considered a central act in the obtainment of knowledge, leading to what he terms a "culture of dissection" (3). Hillary Nunn emphasises the theatricality of this dissective culture, arguing that in early modern London, the public interest in human dissections and playhouse dramas developed nearly simultaneously (4). However, there is also something deeply violent and punitive about this penetrative drive to know at all costs, to rip apart the body of the other and gaze at his or her interior as if interiority were identical with inwardness. What emerges from the penetrative drive to *know*, to find satisfaction in understanding and order, appears uncomfortably close to the eye for eye, tooth for tooth pattern of revenge, which penetrates and dissects the human body according to a grim and unyielding logic. If in *Hamlet*, the antithetical revenge tragedy, Shakespeare gives us a revenger unable to exact vengeance without first *knowing* the truth, he also gives us a revenger conscious that such a penetrative drive is ultimately always frustrated, always defeated by the destructive power of scepticism and doubt, but also that the drive itself is a violent and a vengeful one. David Hillman points out that Hamlet's obsession with knowledge and certainty is associated with an imaginative desire to penetrate not just veiled truths but human bodies.¹⁴

¹⁴ This preoccupation with physical knowing is not, however, always violent. It stretches

Hamlet again and again displays his sense of the importance of corporeal insides. This, coupled with his bodily (and psychological) solitude, and his sense of being denied access to the interior by the bodies around him, leads to an urge to open these bodies. When Hamlet thinks of catching the conscience of the king, for example, he thinks in terms of penetrating to the very center of his body: "I'll tent him to the quick" (2.2.593) he says, as he plans the staging of "The Mousetrap." What Hamlet eventually finds, however, is that the central truth hidden within the body, his fantasies and desires notwithstanding, is not the other's truth – not by any means "the quick" – but simply death. ... All, it seems, that one can ever know of the living interior of the human body is that it is destined for death and decay. (92)

In *Hamlet*, the heart of this mystery would be a human heart. To seek coherence in revenge appears very much like the kind of penetrative, punitive drive which will relentlessly tear apart the body of the other in order to locate some mythical answer which will provide satisfaction, but which in actual fact achieves only violent destruction and mutilation.

In this sense, the question to finish upon, to keep asking, might be less how we might *see* nothing, in the sense of a violent attempt to force it to make itself known. Instead, we might ask rather how we might best encounter it on its own terms, resist investing it with more than it warrants, in a meeting that neither demands the *all* of absolute presentness, absolute having and knowing, nor the furious, nihilistic *nothing* of alienation, an alienation that does violence to the very possibility of that encounter. And it seems that what emerges from the discourse of nothing as theatre, the "nothing" that becomes invested with just this threatening significance for Lear, for Claudio and for Leontes, reveals something about theatre itself as a medium in which the conditions of performance allow *creatio ex nihilo* to emerge and to be encountered, a medium in which different generic possibilities, forms and outcomes as responses to that scepticism appear and are recognised.

For Stanley Cavell, theatre becomes a very specific part of a much larger encounter with scepticism that art itself allows.

back to medieval literature, in which the corporeality of knowledge, especially of God, is often expressed through the tradition of affective piety and beyond. If the legend of Doubting Thomas reflects a human desire to know God physically, then God's knowledge of humanity is often equally interiorised.

I am interested in the possibility of art as a possibility of knowing, or of acknowledging. This means to me an interest in its confrontation with the threat of skepticism, with the possibility that the world we claim to know is not the world there is ... the threat that perhaps our claims do not, let me say, penetrate a world of things and of others apart from me. ("Politics" 172)

Cavell's interest is in the potential that art as a medium displays for resisting the tendency of scepticism, in one of its paradigms, to fall naturally into the shapes and forms of tragedy, along with the vision and realisation of nihilism that tragedy allows. (Or perhaps I should say again here, this *particular* form of tragedy; because as subsequent chapters will go on to suggest, the genre of the history play emerges in dialogue with a very different paradigm of tragedy, a paradigm based less on nihilism than on mournfulness.) This is because, for Cavell, scepticism's threat is its tendency to cast our relation to the world as an impossibility, an unavailability with which there is no argument.

What skepticism threatens is precisely irretrievable outsidedness, an uncrossable line, a position from which it is *obvious* (without argument) that the world is unknowable. What does "threaten" mean? Not that skepticism has in its possession a given place in which to confine and isolate us, but that it is a power that all who possess language possess and may desire: to dissociate oneself, excommunicate oneself from the community in whose agreement, mutual attunement, words exist. (*Disowning* 29)

For Cavell, this position is a way of theatricalising the other, fictionalising them. It arises from out of a conviction that the world is unknowable, but this is in itself a result of a *prior* conviction about the terms on which that world must be known. If the only way of approaching the world is through the kind of absolute knowledge that is *all*, then the sceptical problematic is indeed an insoluble one. But what the generic form of tragedy reveals about scepticism is its anguished tendency to cast the world in polarised terms, as Lear does, so that the possibility of knowing the world *on scepticism's own terms* becomes an all-consuming everything, and the inevitable frustration of which gives way to nihilistic rage. In this sense, scepticism gives way to a self-torturing duplicity; it blinds itself to its own ability to see. Cavell suggests that the specific power of theatre to engage with this sceptical problematic arises out of its ability to reproduce the conditions under which that sceptical anguish achieves its own power, by

confronting us with characters with whom we cannot engage in our own time, but must submit ourselves to theirs.

Tragedy shows that we are responsible for the death of others even when we have not murdered them, and even when we have not manslaughtered them innocently. ... But doesn't the fact that we do not or cannot go up to them just mean that we do not or cannot acknowledge them? One may feel like saying here: The acknowledgment cannot be *completed*. But this does not mean that acknowledging is impossible in a theater. Rather it shows what acknowledging, in a theater, is. And acknowledging in a theater shows what acknowledgment in actuality is. For what is the difference between tragedy in a theater and tragedy in actuality? In both, people in pain are in our presence. But in actuality there is no acknowledgment, unless we put ourselves in their presence, reveal ourselves to them. ... The conditions of theater literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside – hiddenness, silence, isolation – hence make that existence plain. Theater does not expect us simply to stop theatricalizing...but in giving us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a place to stop. (*Disowning* 103-04)

We might say, then, that theatre allows us a sceptical encounter with nothing, and that it shows us scepticism *as* theatre; the degree to which the sceptic's encounter with its object is cast in theatrical terms. What the sceptic does, what Lear does, is to invest the world, the other, with the power to make it whole. Feeling itself incomplete, the sceptic asks the world, as Lear does, to present herself to him, to make herself available. Faced with denial, finding what is offered inadequate and disappointing, it offers an interpretation, investing that denial ("*Nothing, my lord*") with metaphysical significance, casting that modest and withdrawing *nothing* as a seductress withholding a terrible secret. And so it offers its violent, penetrative, dissective interpretation, which is the demand to *know* on its own terms, rather than to acknowledge, which is an act of appalling violence, tragic but not ethical against both itself and that other. And drawing our attention to the theatrical encounter with scepticism, as Lear, and Claudio, and Leontes are all confronted with a *nothing* that they invest and interpret with such catastrophic results, theatre also makes present to us, its audience, conditions under which we might also be required to resist interpretation, to allow theatre to emerge on its own terms, to make itself present to us, to allow an

of that ending is right there haunting the final scene, pushing the experience of loss that it dramatises over an edge. Why does Leontes get that ending, but not Lear? Lear and Gloucester have been wrung out by tragedy, have lost everything, but more importantly, they have been *through* tragedy. As I suggested earlier, they have found “nothing” within themselves, lost their eyes, learnt to “see...feelingly”. *Why*, after all of this, does Cordelia have to die? And if tragedy teaches us, as Cavell suggests, that we are responsible for the death of others, for *her* death, then how is this possible?

We are responsible for Cordelia’s death in two instances, as the play is, and in both of them it is because we do not allow her to make herself present to us. In the first instance, we place ourselves alongside Lear, because for all his insight, and all his new-found understanding, there is a way in which he finishes the play where he began: not only blind but *deaf* to Cordelia. Lear begins the play with an inability to listen to what Cordelia is telling him: that she cannot give him her all; that she cannot make him whole again in the way that he demands and indeed begs. We know this; we pride ourselves on seeing what Lear will not see, on hearing what he will hear only later. But for all this, it is still a relief, a wish-fulfilment of *our* prayers as much as of Lear’s, when Cordelia returns at the head of an army. We are complicit with him: we have demanded that she should return. And as many readers of this terrible play have noted, even after the disastrous defeat of Cordelia’s army Lear is still prepared to be happy, still prepared to base *his* chance of happiness on *her* sacrifice, as he takes her away to live in his gilded cage to him, all in all to one another, telling her not to weep. But if we notice it then, we are about to become complicit again, when with Edgar and with Albany we forget both Cordelia and Lear, forget them while the long dénouement of the subplot unravels, until faithful clear-sighted Kent arrives to ask the question of their whereabouts and Albany responds with our own appalled horror, our own complicity. Great thing of us forgot, indeed. And so it is that Lear, who began this play with an inability to hear Cordelia, to listen to what she has been telling him, and who has *still* been unable to hear her even when she returns, seems at last to have learned how to listen to this daughter.

Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha?
What is’t thou sayst? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.

...
... O thou'lt come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never. (5.3.269-71; 306-07)

He has learnt to listen, as well as to speak, but it is too late. Her *nothing, my lord* was not the absolute withdrawal that he thought it was, but he has first claimed her, and then alienated her, and then claimed her again, until her drawing-back becomes a final, absolute and inevitable unresponsiveness in the face of which language once again fails. In such a *nothing* is tragedy's promised end.

Chapter 2: *Timon of Athens*

The Life of Timon of Athens, to give it its proper title, is a strange play that at times appears peculiarly difficult and unsatisfactory. Written as a collaboration between Shakespeare and his younger contemporary Thomas Middleton some time around 1607, the earliest surviving text is that of the 1623 First Folio. It is possible that Heminges and Condell, the compilers of the Folio, did not originally intend to print the play at all, as it appears in the place originally intended for *Troilus and Cressida*, which was itself temporarily removed before being reinserted at the end of the Tragedies. *Timon of Athens* and *Troilus and Cressida* are also, as it happens, the only two plays classified as Tragedies in the First Folio in which the term “tragedy” does not appear in the title.

Shakespeare finds at least some of his basic source material for the play in Thomas North’s 1579 English translation of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, which is also his source for most of the Roman plays. Plutarch includes a brief life of Timon in his much longer life of Mark Antony, in addition to a brief mention in his life of Alcibiades. Interestingly, he refers to it as providing material, not for tragedy, but for comedy.

This Timon was a citizen of Athens, and lived much about the Peloponnesian war, as may be seen by the comedies of Aristophanes and Plato,¹⁶ in which he is ridiculed as hater and enemy of mankind. He avoided and repelled the approaches of every one, but embraced with kisses and the greatest show of affection Alcibiades, then in his hot youth. (*Life of Antony* 317)

References to Timon appear twice in Aristophanes, once in *The Birds* and once in *Lysistrata*. Whether or not Shakespeare would have encountered either of these directly is impossible to say, but the reference in *Lysistrata* at least is remarkable more for its contrast than its similarities: the chorus of Old Women refer to Timon as a man who, for all his hatred of *men*, was “dear to all the womenkind”. Shakespeare’s protagonist, by contrast, is notable more for the vileness of his misogyny, a characteristic all the more striking for appearing to be totally without grounds or cause. Anthony Dawson and Gretchen Minton argue in the

¹⁶ Here, “Plato” refers not to the famous philosopher but to the poet Plato Comicus, contemporary of Aristophanes.

introduction to their Arden edition that Timon “did not come down to the Renaissance as a tragic character, but instead as one to be laughed at or observed with curiosity (Introduction to *Timon of Athens* 19). This is certainly how he is treated in another probable source for the play, Lucian’s 2nd century Greek dialogue *Timon the Misanthrope*, as well as in the anonymous Renaissance play *Timon*, which was based on Lucian’s dialogue. That Shakespeare’s tragedy is strongly marked by satire cannot, then, be purely ascribed to the influence of Middleton: it grows out of a literary tradition already more inclined to comedy than to tragedy. This only intensifies the question of what it is which marks out Shakespeare’s version as ultimately tragic.

The difficulties with which anyone approaching Shakespeare’s *Timon* finds themselves confronted have perhaps been partly responsible for a certain state of critical and theatrical neglect. In the midst of his misfortunes Timon seems to do his utmost to repulse the sympathetic reader or audience in rather the same way that he does his faithful steward Flavius. The alienating force of satire reverberates throughout much of the play, leaving a taste as bitter as Timon’s curses. He cannot bring himself to plead, as Lear does: “Pray do not mock me./ I am a very foolish, fond old man” (4.7.59-60). On the contrary, in many ways mocking laughter seems the most appropriate soundtrack to this acidic drama. And yet, at least one eminent critic has felt that the play is a very great tragedy indeed. G. Wilson Knight maintains in *The Wheel of Fire* that the play demonstrates “a tragic movement more precipitous than any other in Shakespeare; one which is conceived on a scale even more tremendous than that of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*; and whose universal tragic significance is of all the most clearly apparent” (235). Knight’s belief that the starkness of the rhetorical and dramaturgical reversal is what gives *Timon* its tragic pre-eminence, and that it has something about to say about the basic nature of tragedy itself, is made apparent later in the essay.

Timon is the archetype and norm of all tragedy. ... There is no tragic movement so swift, so clean-cut, so daring and so terrible in all Shakespeare as this of Timon. We pity Lear, we dread for Macbeth: but the awfulness of Timon, dwarfing pity and out-topping sympathy, is as the grandeur and menace of the naked rock of a sky-lifted mountain, whither we look and tremble. (251-52)

Interestingly, Knight seems to be echoing two of the most controversial terms in the history of tragic criticism (here “pity” and “dread”, or as Aristotle would have it, *eleos* and *phobos*, the two qualities which the philosopher claims distinguish tragedy as a genre). Yet Knight refutes the idea that *Timon* can be seriously considered in such terms, even as he stakes his bold claim for *Timon*’s right to the title of archetypal tragedy. In Aristotelian terms, Knight’s ideas about the nature of tragedy are confined to the notion of *peripeteia* or reversal, which in *Timon* divides the play neatly into two halves: before and after his betrayal. In this the play is simpler than either *Lear* or *Coriolanus*, both of which hurl their protagonists – and audiences – through rapidly alternating hopes and fears before the final and decisively tragic dénouement. The movement of *Timon*, by contrast, is a decisive sweep from the heights to the depths, from “allness” over a precipice to nothing, and it is in this movement that Knight locates what he sees as the essence of what is most tragic about the play.

The critic A.D. Nuttall, although considerably less lyrical than Knight in his treatment of the play, also sees in it a striking overall movement towards negation. “Shakespeare is essaying the almost impossible task of dramatising negation itself” he argues in his monograph on the play, entitled simply *Timon of Athens* (141), and he repeats this idea in his later book *Shakespeare the Thinker*.

When Timon tells his guests that he is giving them nothing, we may think of Cordelia’s more frightening “Nothing”, the key word of *King Lear*. Timon really is a kind of nobody. It may be that pure negation, as distinct from the slow approach to negation, is undramatizable. The approach to nothingness is exciting, but nothingness itself is boring and featureless. ... “Love survives” is, I suppose, a cliché, but at the end of *King Lear* it is no cliché. But Timon in the wilderness is thoroughly dehumanized. (320)

For all that they express themselves very differently, Knight and Nuttall thus make two very similar observations about the majestic sweep from all to nothing which underpins *Timon*. The first point is that there is something about this movement towards nothing which is fundamental to the play as a *tragedy*. The second is that there is something deeply alienating about that movement. Knight argues that we look, and tremble, but we cannot feel for Timon; Nuttall sees him as “dehumanized”, a tragic character for whom we cannot experience sympathy

(in the sense of a “feeling together”, or a fellow-feeling). So I begin here with the idea that the polarised points of “all” and “nothing” might have something to tell us about this particular paradigm of tragedy dramatised by *Timon* as well as by *Lear*, remarking that it seems to be partly held responsible for the degree to which not only Timon but *Timon* alienates its audience. In other words, the play does not only portray alienation; it is itself alienating. For this reason, I want to keep in play the idea that if the trope of all or nothing has something to tell us about the nature of a particular paradigm of tragedy that Shakespeare is developing in these plays, tragedy as a movement towards nihilism, then this might in turn have something to do with the process of alienation.

In *Timon of Athens*, the trope of all-to-nothing is articulated most centrally through the idea of giving, which is also the device by which the play achieves its momentous, all-to-nothing sweeping movement. The first half of the play depicts Timon as the benevolent and aristocratic Athenian, the man of seemingly infinite wealth and equally infinite generosity. The play’s reversal occurs as a double blow. First comes Timon’s realisation that he has unwittingly managed to give away all his great wealth to his friends. Then, subsequently, comes the discovery that he will be abandoned and rejected by these same friends now that he no longer has the means to keep himself and to pay his debts. Reduced to absolute penury, and embittered by such a betrayal, Timon flees the city. He will spend the rest of the play in a state of implacable misanthropy, living in a pit outside the city gates while raving against the whole human race and refusing to acknowledge friend from foe until his eventual, lonely death. From the great benefactor of mankind to the “poor, bare, forked animal” (*King Lear* 3.4.105-06), stripped not only of every material possession but of almost every human emotion too, the play’s great reversal depicts a man who has all, who gives all, and who is in the end reduced to absolute nothingness. This raises the question: what might be implied in such a state of allness? Why might it give way so easily into absolute negation?

The initial scene upon which the tragedy opens is characterised by a dreamlike, fantastical plenitude: plenitude of people, of words, of gifts, of riches. As the play opens, a Poet, a Painter, a Jeweller and a Merchant emerge on-stage from different directions. Although they may work in very different professions,

ultimately all are just tradesmen, all hungry for grace, favour and reward. The opening lines of the play set the tone, treating almost immediately of a benevolent, magnanimous ideal of fullness. "See,/ Magic of bounty, all these spirits thy power/ Hath conjured to attend" (1.1.5-7), declares the Poet to his acquaintance the Painter, gesturing towards the other craftsmen. Even before the conversation moves to Timon himself, his legendary riches and even more legendary bounties, the city becomes rapidly characterised by a mood and tone of expansiveness. This is established largely by snatches of conversation throughout the early part of the scene which describe everything in terms of its abundance: "a most incomparable man"; "a good form/ And rich"; "this great flood of visitors"; "amplest entertainment" (1.1.10-46). This initial scene expresses more than simple good fortune: it is a scene of plenteousness, of profusion. Verbally and linguistically as much as anything else, Athens is overflowing. The city lives and breathes the language of excess, from the "magic of bounty" of the opening lines to the comically overblown and excessive praise uttered by merchant and poet. "O, 'tis a worthy lord...A most incomparable man, breathed as it were/ To an untireable and continue goodness" (1.1.9-10), rhapsodises the merchant, presumably of Timon, although his words emerge mid-conversation as if *a propos* of nothing in particular. The Poet's response to the Painter's work is similarly effusive to the point of parody: a series of admiring ejaculations ("Admirable!" "I will say of it/ It tutors nature" and so on (1.1.25-39)). Everything here seems a little overblown or too full; fulsome, in fact. The phrase "Magic of bounty" implies that the air of Athens is charmed, but also insubstantial, unreal.

It is against this magical scene of plenitude that the figure of Timon and his tragedy emerges. As in *Doctor Faustus* the audience are effectively warned of the tragedy that is to come before its subject makes his first appearance on stage. Timon makes his appearance just after the conclusion of a conversation between the Poet and the Painter in which the Poet describes his new poem about the lady Fortune, enthroned on a hill and thronged by suppliants, which he apparently intends to dedicate to Timon when it is finished. Here we have the tragedy of *Timon* in microcosm. This little word-painted tableau stems explicitly from the idea of the "wheel of fortune", an idea which was popularised by the 6th

century philosopher Boethius in his *Consolatio Philosophiae* and recurs throughout the medieval literary imagination. Appearing here, it locates *Timon* firmly within the *de casibus* tradition of tragedy, at the heart of which lies the caution of man's ultimate instability, the warning that snares lie in wait for those who put their trust in fickle and changeable Fortune.

Poet. Sir, I have upon a high and pleasant hill
Feigned Fortune to be throned. The base o' th' mount
Is ranked with all deserts, all kind of natures
That labour on the bosom of this sphere
To propagate their states. Amongst them all
Whose eyes are on this sovereign Lady fixed,
One do I personate of Lord Timon's frame,
Whom Fortune with her ivory hand wafts to her,
Whose present grace to present slaves and servants
Translates his rivals.

Painter. 'Tis conceived to scope.
This throne, this Fortune and this hill, methinks,
With one man beckoned from the rest below
Bowing his head against the steepy mount
To climb his happiness, would be well expressed
In our condition.

Poet. Nay, sir, but hear me on:
All those which were his fellows but of late -
Some better than his value - on the moment
Follow his strides, his lobbies fill with tendance,
Rain sacrificial whisperings in his ear,
Make sacred even his stirrup and through him
Drink the free air.

Painter. Ay, marry, what of these?

Poet. When Fortune in her shift and change of mood
Spurns down her late beloved, all his dependants,
Which laboured after him to the mountain's top
Even on their knees and hands, let him slip down,
Not one accompanying his declining foot.

Painter. 'Tis common:
A thousand moral paintings I can show
That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortune's
More pregnantly than words. Yet you do well
To show Lord Timon that mean eyes have seen
The foot above the head. (1.1.65-96)

The Poet's microcosmic figuring of Timon's tragedy explicitly links the scene of Athens, with its overblown and unreal air of fullness and excess, its "magic of bounty", with the enchanted scene of Fortune's hill. The fantastical figure of the mysterious and profoundly remote lady at the top of the hill is ambiguous: her

“grace” suggests the divine goddess, her “ivory hand” the ethereal and untouchable mistress, while the way she “wafts” her chosen favourite towards her suggests the otherworldly magical powers of the witch. “Translates” is an especially ambiguous term. On the one hand it echoes the Biblical term of the miracle of rapture, the instantaneous “translation” of the righteous man from earthly life to heaven without death (“Translate”; see also *King James Bible* 2 Sam. 3.10; Col. 1.13; Heb. 11.5). On the other hand, it also suggests a change of state which is not always benign; Fortune’s Circe-like ability to seduce and ensnare her victims before translating them from their human state into beasts or sub-humans (as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Quince greets Bottom’s entry with the ass’s head with the panicked cry: “Bless thee Bottom, bless thee, thou art translated!”). Fortune’s power to translate men with the crook of a finger is thus both the fulfilment of a dream, and a potential nightmare as, at a whim, in an instant, she both whisks Timon away from the company of ordinary men and condemns his erstwhile fellows into slaves – each with apparent ease and indifference. Her selection, or seduction, of Timon is made to seem all the more magical and unreal for its apparently arbitrary nature: he is singled out seemingly at random from among many others, “Some better than his value”. If it is a dream come true, a smile from a divine mistress, then it is also potentially demonic, as the power of the witch emerges from behind the divine veil.

In a powerful and illuminating reading of the play, presented in her 1987 essay “‘Magic of Bounty’: *Timon of Athens*, Jacobean Patronage and Maternal Power”, Coppélia Kahn combines feminist, psychoanalytic and new historicist scholarship to argue that this image of Fortune helps us to understand a “core fantasy” of maternal power informing the dramatic imagination of the play and its great tragic movement from all to nothing.

Timon, Shakespeare’s most solitary hero, has no family and holds no office; he is equally estranged from women and from politics. The play, it would seem, resists questions of both gender and power. Nonetheless, I believe, a deeply felt fantasy of woman and of power animates the play and provides a paradigm for its strikingly bifurcated action. ... Without this fantasy of maternal bounty and maternal betrayal, the play’s two disjunct halves would lack psychological coherence (as many critics maintain they do). ... The play’s core fantasy consists of two scenes in the course of which a male self is precipitated out of a profound and

empowering oneness with the mother into a treacherous group of men in which he is powerless. It is the mother who betrays him, the whorish mother who singles him out and then spurns him. (35)

Kahn reads in the image of Fortune a picture of infantile dependency and maternal nurture akin to Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, or to Lady Macbeth giving suck. At first, this image is soothing, but it becomes abruptly and violently treacherous as the mother suddenly abandons and rejects her child, snatching her breast away or spurning him back down the hill in a catastrophic fall. Kahn thus finds in this “profound and empowering oneness” a kind of primal fantasy of contented union, in which the childlike masculine self and its maternal other become all-in-all to one another. It is kind of total being and total having through the idea of absolute bounty, the gift of the nurturing mother to her beloved. We can thus read in the charmed “allness” dramatised by the opening of *Timon* an enchanted wholeness, an ecstasy of union and completeness which is achieved through the idea of receiving the other in her entirety. It is a fantasy which hints through Fortune’s multi-faceted nature – exquisitely seductive mistress as well as bountiful maternal goddess – at a fullness of union which is sexual as well as nurturing; a kind of allness which we might think of in terms of *jouissance*.

What Kahn refers to as the “strikingly bifurcated action” and “two disjunct halves of the play” are the two polarised extremes of what I am arguing here to be the movement from all to nothing which underpins the dramaturgy of these plays, whose tragedy is closely bound up with their nihilism; a movement which exploits the received forms of classical and of medieval tragedy to dramatise a powerful vision of a universe conceived in terms of polar opposites, *all* and *nothing*. This movement is most obviously visible in *Timon* because it more than any of the other tragedies foregrounds these two extremes, as Knight and Nuttall both recognise. In *Timon* the process of the reversal is more of a feature than it is in *Coriolanus*, where the movement from triumph to banishment and exile is more savagely swift, yet more compressed than it is in *King Lear*, where it is dwelt upon, prolonging the drawn-out agony of the journey from all to nothing. The effect of this is to make a feature of the absolute dichotomy of the two states, as well as starkly contrasting them by the speed with which Timon is flung from one to the other. This is no mere fall from good fortune to bad, but from a

mystical state of wholeness to its polar opposite And if the allness emerges as a kind of *jouissance*, the “nothing” to which it gives way –as the previous chapter has aimed to show – proves even more complex and ambiguous. For now, however, I want to confine myself to observing that Kahn’s illuminating analysis of the scene of allness in terms of a primal fantasy of union with the maternal other also contributes to the growing sense that one of the most important issues at stake in this state of allness (and, by extension, of its polar opposite) is the place of the (masculine) self, and its relationship with its other.

The enchanted tableau makes explicit the connection between the magical scene of allness, which characterises both Fortune’s hill and the air of Athens, and the state of constant grasping which underpins it. In changing the scene from the wheel of Fortune to the hill, Shakespeare effects a shift in emphasis. Rather than emphasising man’s passivity, subject to the random turns of the wheel, here he creates a scene rather more like the “Field Full of Folk” in *Piers Plowman*, emphasising the undignified scramble for self-promotion, the distinctly corporate-looking rat-race in which every human being is occupied, every “mean” eye fixed greedily and obsessively upon the remote sovereign figure at the top of the hill.¹⁷ It is a contemptible and embarrassing prospect, and one whose irony is heightened by the fact that the Poet and Painter are subtly engaged in reflecting and enacting its petty rivalries even as they converse, the Painter making continual if low-key efforts to downplay his rival’s achievement by attempting to steer the conversation towards a discussion of the relative merits of his own art or “condition”, as well as his final pointed remark that the Poet’s art is “common”, and has failed to produce anything that painters have not already depicted a thousand times before. At the heart of the tragedy lies a narrative of the economy of exchange, of gift and receipt. All the tradesmen of the opening scene have something they wish to sell, in return for the reward of something which they desire. The fullness of words and of gifts which characterises their exchanges is part of this economy, part of the constant state of hungry craving for advancement in which they are constantly involved:

¹⁷ For an earlier literary satire on this kind of scrambling for Fortune’s favour, see for example Skelton’s *Bowge of Courte*.

everyone in Athens, everyone who throngs the lower reaches of Fortune's hill, is fundamentally defined by being in a state of hunger or desire.

Defined against this busy background of swarming, hungry men, the remote and magical fantasy of "allness" to which Fortune's beckoning finger transports Timon is really a state of *not* being in desire. To enjoy all of Fortune's bounty, to have all of her, is to be in a state of such wholeness, such completeness of having and of being, that it is impossible to want for anything. Timon's place on Fortune's hill is defined both by his position in union with Fortune, all-in-all with her, *and* by his position in relation to his fellow-men. When Fortune beckons Timon to her she translates him, as the Poet recognises, effecting a fundamental shift in his relationship with his erstwhile fellow men. Her choice of him, her creation of him as all-in-all, simultaneously translates his erstwhile fellows into "slaves and servants", sub-humans whose hungry mouths are dependent upon Timon for their every morsel, and translates Timon himself into something more than human, transporting him into a divine world beyond desire. Timon's position as the one chosen by Fortune to enjoy her bounties, thus becoming all-bounteous himself, is experienced, then, as a kind simultaneous miracle of union (with her) and estrangement (from desiring mortals). To be a mortal man is to desire: to enter this feminine and divine world is to *desire nothing*. Timon's own words, near the end of the play, echo this interpretation exactly: "My long sickness/ Of health and living now begins to mend,/ And nothing brings me all things" (5.2.72-73). To be alive, to be mortal, is to be sick: it is in desiring nothing that allness is found. In *Timon's* vision, the fount of godhead is the fount of all-having, all-being, of desiring nothing. Timon's frenzy of giving, and his refusal to accept the slightest gift from any of his fellow-men in return, is therefore an imaginative performance of divinity: by giving all to his friends and taking nothing in return, he imitates the gift of God. Several critics have remarked upon the parallels between Christ and Timon, the man who gives his all to his friends in an act of absolute generosity and apparent selflessness, and who suffers appalling ingratitude and abandonment in return. Fortune's selection, or seduction, of Timon translates him into a figure marked by, sometimes even imaginatively identified with, the divine. This identification is performed through the idea of the gift, central to the play. Anthony Dawson and

Gretchen Minton compare this kind of giving to the remote God of Calvin, the withdrawn divine figure upon whom man finds himself dependent, and to whom he is denied any possibility of making a return. Such a God is whole, complete unto himself, needing nothing. The proof of this is in the frenzy of giving in which Timon indulges, the endless and one-way economy of giving which he establishes.

The idea of giving is the device through which the play effects its great reversal from all to nothing. It is Timon's apparent inability to realise the limitations of his wealth, or to listen to the warnings of his steward regarding his precarious financial position, which brings about his bankruptcy and rejection. The play's fixation on the idea of the gift also explores the complexities of the relationship which exists between the one who gives and the one who receives. There are two types of gift in play here, the first being the "material" gift and the second the gift of praise. Any act of giving implies both a donor and a recipient, and the gift presents both with a crucially *sceptical* problem: if a gift is given – or praise spoken – with the expectation of a return (here, usually in the form of money or patronage) then how is the recipient to know for certain whether it is given freely and disinterestedly or not? Equally, if the donor knows that their gift is likely to be rewarded, then, how are they to avoid acting with interest? In the opening scene the Poet recites to himself a few lines encapsulating the problem of patronage: once praise is mixed with gain, it can never again be free from taint. "When we for recompense have praised the vile,/ It stains the glory in that happy verse/ Which aptly sings the good" (1.1.16-18). Praise is a complicated business both for giver and for recipient: if reward is at stake, it seems impossible that the praise itself should remain pure without being corrupted by obligation, by the potential for, if not the fact of, flattery (the same problem that confronts Cordelia). This sense of excess is reinforced by the disjointed conversations taking place across the stage in the opening scene, marked as they are by praise which goes beyond the bounds of admiration, entering the realm of the absurd. Here, it seems, it is impossible that one should give voice to praise which is untainted by flattery, just as Timon's followers are fully, and often cynically, aware that that a gift to him always generates a greater reward. As the 2nd Lord remarks: "no gift to him/ But breeds the giver a return exceeding/ All use of quittance" (1.1.285-87). This of course provokes the question: how is one to

negotiate the problem that any gift given with recognition of its status becomes automatically ambiguous, not really a gift at all? At its heart, the gift treats of a relationship between two persons, the giver and the recipient, and in this sense the sceptical problem – how do I know whether what this person is giving me is pure gift or not – is also a problem of the basic relationship between self and other: how do I know whether this other who offers to me the gift of friendship, of love, is speaking the truth?

Timon seems fully aware of the problem of the impossible gift, and has attempted to solve it. Timon's mantra is "There's none can truly say he gives if he receives" (1.2.10-11), and so he insists on repaying every gift sevenfold; he cannot keep the jewel he is given without immediately giving it away again; he refuses to allow those to whom he gives to repay him in any kind at all. In so doing, he creates a fantasy of *total* giving. Timon's position as the fountainhead of patronage and generosity, strewing gifts as fast as he can speak and refusing to accept the slightest favour in return, effectively creates an enchanted dream of absolute munificence, of an economy of giving which flows in one direction only; "magic of bounty" indeed. Yet it is this apparently "pure" giving which in the end results in tragedy, and there is a long tradition of regarding Timon's generosity with deep suspicion. In the "comic Timon" tradition more common in pre-Shakespearean versions of the Timon myth, Timon is mocked for his blindness and stupidity; how could a man be so naïve as not to realise that his wealth is limited, that his friends are really his leeches? it asks scornfully. Timon's dealings with these men form a pattern of generosity, pushed to such excesses that they become as parodic as the poet's praise of his friend's painting: besieged by suitors, he behaves as a caricature of a benefactor, pouring out wealth and favour as fast as he can speak. The play is preoccupied with the problem of what it means to give something, and of what relation that might bear to an economy of exchange. What, it asks, does it mean to give, and to give one's *all*?

The question of the gift received its first extended and productive treatment in the 1924 monograph by the French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss, first translated into English in 1954 as *The Gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, and which influenced the structuralist theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss among others. Over the course of the essay Mauss

develops a theory of the gift based upon a range of examples drawn from different societies. Especially prominent among these examples is the “potlatch”, a complex system of gift-giving found among some of the North American Indian peoples of the north-west coast. The system of the potlatch is based upon a dynamic of reciprocity: a gift, once given and accepted, must be followed up by a return in the shape of a gift of equal or often of greater value. Mauss observes that the potlatch is therefore in essence a relation of *exchange*, upon which the society operates. Describing and explaining the intricacies of this institution, he notes that it arouses intense rivalry, competitiveness and antagonism, as clans vie with one another in exaggerated demonstrations of wealth and hospitality. Potlatching is a system in which a power struggle takes place, involving at a very fundamental level the honour of both parties: to give a potlatch is a sign of power, wealth and strength; to refuse to accept or reciprocate is a shameful admission of weakness. Displays of potlatching sometimes veer towards madness, involving violent destruction of riches in exaggerated, excessive displays of wealth and power. At its heart, therefore, potlatching is a system of gift-giving based upon exchange, which veers easily into displays of excess and from there into extreme aggression.

Mauss’s theory of the gift as a system of social exchange, a framework around which social relations and social bonds can be accumulated but one which also becomes the medium for the expression of rage, violence and aggression, is one to which several critics of *Timon* have responded. Kahn’s two-pronged feminist and new historicist approach leads her to explore the play’s articulation of Timon’s excessive gift-giving not only in terms of a fantasy of maternal bounty, but also in relation to the social system of reciprocal giving (or exchange) which it fuels. She parallels this account with contemporary accounts of the wasteful, spendthrift but also compulsively liberal-handed court of James I and VI.¹⁸

¹⁸ As Kahn’s article itself reminds us, this system of social gift-giving, credit and usury was not limited to James I or his court, but was endemic to Elizabethan society more generally. See Lawrence Stone for a detailed account of the financial crisis suffered by the English aristocracy around the turn of the century; Stone argues that its eventual economic recovery was directly linked to the compulsive prodigality of James I, who gave away more than £1 000 000 to the peerage over the course of his reign.

In articulating this fantasy...Shakespeare draws upon the cultural forms that constituted patronage in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods: gift-giving and credit finance, known then as usury. *Timon* explores the lethal ambiguities underlying the gifts and loans through which power was brokered in the courts of Elizabeth and James. It figures forth a Jacobean version of what anthropologists call in Melanesia, the Philippines, and the Pacific Northwest “the Big Man system”. (35)

Kahn’s article responds to the violence inherent in Mauss’s theory of the gift, arguing that Timon’s obsessive giving, his inability to accept a reciprocal gift, is ultimately a form of narcissism underpinned by aggression towards – and the fear of suffering aggression from – that other with whom gift-giving automatically establishes a relationship. Kahn therefore sees this relationship as fundamentally *alienating*, an all-or-nothing relationship defined by the status of the gift. “The reversal of fortune that makes the play so disjointed fulfills Timon’s deepest wishes, the wishes of a man who can only deal with his idea of the mother by total identification or total *dis*-identification, in the form of an indiscriminating hostility towards all things human” (41).

More recently, Jacques Derrida has taken up and explored the difficulties inherent in any act of giving in his essay *Given Time*. This essay is in part a response to and critical engagement with Mauss’s *The Gift*, as well as to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Derrida takes up what he sees as the fundamental issue around which Mauss skirts: the question of how a gift could remain a gift if it remains trapped within a relation or cycle of exchange. For Mauss, he argues, the gift – in the form of the potlatch – is itself just a form of exchange: “Mauss does not worry enough about this incompatibility between gift and exchange or about the fact that an exchanged gift is only a tit for tat, that is, an annulment of the gift” (37). What Derrida extrapolates and retains from Mauss is his sense that the gift does bear some intrinsic relation to exchange from which it cannot escape. But Derrida problematises the nature of this relationship.

One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? ... It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form

of return to the point of departure. If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible. (7)

For Derrida, the concept of giving a gift automatically implies the expectation of some form of return, which can take many forms: such a return may take the guise of material item, words of gratitude, or simple psychological affirmation (“I have given this gift, and therefore recognise what a good person I am”). Giving, for Derrida, thus becomes a challenging paradox: for a gift to escape the economy of exchange, it must not be recognised to be a gift by either giver or recipient, thus avoiding the implicit expectation of a response. He argues that the gift is always and already implicated in the circle of economic exchange, but crucially, it must find a way to suspend this economic relationship if it is to avoid this aggressive aspect of the circle that Mauss describes, the implicit threat of the devouring and consumption of the other.

Drawing on the literary tradition of the parasite, *Timon of Athens* establishes a strong imaginative connection between the acts of giving and feeding. This occurs most obviously during the great set-piece banqueting scene of the first half, to which Timon invites all those to whom he wishes to show his greatest generosity, and then in its counterpart, the mock-banquet of stones and water to which he summons his former friends after their rejection of him. Those to whom Timon wishes to give something, he usually invites to supper: just before the first feast, we see one lord say to another, “Come, shall we in and taste Lord Timon’s bounty?” (1.1.281). Ventidius, the man previously redeemed from prison by Timon’s money, makes his first appearance at this feast, while we have previously seen Timon tell his friend Alcibiades “You must needs dine with me” (1.1.249) and ask the “churlish philosopher” Apemantus persuasively if unsuccessfully, “Wilt dine with me?” (1.1.206). Here, to give to one’s friends is to feed them. The problem lies in the ease with which the idea of tasting Lord Timon’s bounty slides into the idea of tasting, or feeding upon, Lord Timon himself, as feeding becomes cannibalism. The early scenes of the play are full of references to feeding and consuming. Many of these refer to Timon himself as the

cannibalised object, but not all: in the first scene, for example, Apemantus makes clear the imaginative connection between feeding, hunger and desire.

Timon. Wilt dine with me, Apemantus?

Apemantus. No, I eat no lords.

Timon. An thou should'st, thou'dst anger ladies.

Apemantus. O, they eat lords, so they come by great bellies.

(1.1.206-09)

In these lines Apemantus parallels feeding and cannibalism, desire and consumption. A voracious hunger for food, it seems, threatens to turn all too easily into a hunger for human flesh and blood; even more horrifying is the blurring of boundaries between the belly swollen with food and with pregnancy. In Apemantus' misogynistic fantasy, female erotic desire becomes a kind of ravenous appetite, consuming and cannibalising the male. This vision of desire as cannibalistic consumption is taken up and developed, frequently with reference to Timon himself. In the second scene, the idea of feeding upon fellow creatures is first lamented by Apemantus and then celebrated by Alcibiades.

Apemantus. O you gods, what a number of men eat Timon, and he sees 'em not! it grieves me to see so many dip their bread in one man's blood.

...

Timon. You had rather be at a breakfast of enemies than a dinner of friends.

Alcibiades. So they were bleeding-fresh, my lord, there's no meat like them; I could wish my best friends at such a feast.

(1.2.39-41; 75-79)

This image has clear Eucharistic resonances: Apemantus' words gesture towards Timon as a sort of cannibalised Christ-figure, ravaged and bleeding from the mouths of those to whom he attempts to give himself. The fantasy of feeding in this play draws on the more fraught and anxious side of the Last Supper, with its preoccupation with cannibalism and betrayal. Here there is no washing of feet; no humility; at the Last Supper there is one traitor present, but in the violent world of Timon all men are traitors and Timon himself is as violent as any. Timon's generosity seems designed to distance him from his debtors, enslaving them in endless debt. Alcibiades' words echo the raw bloodthirstiness of Apemantus' vision, implying a gluttonous cannibalistic feast. In his terms, friends and enemies become curiously conflated: it is ambiguous to which he refers

when he states that “there’s no meat like ’em”. The fantasy of absolute giving, of the bountiful ability to satisfy the other’s every need, all too easily slides into the nightmarish horror of being devoured by the other; as in Alcibiades’ speech, the line separating friend from enemy is a fine one, and one bleeding and mangled corpse looks much like another. Returning for one final time to the image of Fortune’s hill, we see that Timon’s transformation is from an ordinary fellow-man into something “sacred”, something marked out by the divine touch. As he is beckoned forward, wafted towards the goddess, the rest in an instant become his followers and servants, falling back in recognition of his changed state. Yet still they cluster at his heels, their “sacrificial whisperings” ringing in his ears. As Timon is translated, the eyes which have been obsessively fixed upon the remote figure of Fortune become hungrily, greedily fixed on him. He has become the sacred vessel, through which they will drink their freedom, but he is also their holy sacrifice, the sacred scapegoat who is both hallowed and accursed.¹⁹ If Timon is become imaginatively identified with God, he is the god who is *eaten*. But his status as the sacred vessel or channel through which the city drinks its freedom, together with the imaginative exile which he undergoes (an exile imaginary inasmuch as it is self-inflicted) associates him as much with a figure like Oedipus, the sacrificial figure who is one who stands in between the divine and the human, and is thus both sanctified and obscene.

The fantasy of human sacrifice and ravenous desire reaches climactic prominence when after Timon’s bankruptcy he becomes surrounded by clamouring creditors crying for their “bills”, which also echoes the idea of birds’ bills, or beaks, (like the “pelican daughters” Lear imagines Goneril and Regan to be, another image which simultaneously invokes an imaginative identification with the divine). The 2008 Shakespeare’s Globe production of *Timon*, which included a chorus of actors dressed as giant birds on stage, drew attention to this moment by having the birds surround Timon at this point, flapping and squawking as they pecked at him. Timon responds to this hungry onslaught with a flood of passion, imagining a scene straight out of the *Merchant of Venice*.

¹⁹ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Chapter 3 looks at the figure of the king as mediator between human and divine worlds, with reference to *Richard II*.

Philotus. All our bills.

Timon. Knock me down with 'em, cleave me to the girdle. ...Cut my heart in sums. ... Tell out my blood. ... Five thousand drops pays that... Tear me, take me, and the gods fall upon you!
(3.4 87-97)

Just as in the *Merchant*, the concept of a bond is being called into question. Just what does it mean to say that one has a “bond” with someone: if Cordelia has a “bond” of love with Lear, what is encompassed in this, and what are the terms of its fulfilment? How metaphorical is the comparison between a debt of friendship and an economic debt? What is the relationship between mercantile bonds and the bonds of friendship, and how easily may either “bond” become “bondage”? Alcibiades’ bloodthirsty words suggest that the gap between friend and foe may not be so wide as one might like to imagine. One character, the First Stranger who passes across the stage at the time of Timon’s fall, suggests ironically that friendship is dependent upon some form of feeding.

Who can call him
His friend that dips in the same dish? for, in
My knowing, Timon has been this lord’s father
... he ne’er drinks
But Timon’s silver treads upon his lip.
... For mine own part
I never tasted Timon in my life,
Nor came any of his bounties over me
To mark me for his friend. (3.2.68-70; 73-74; 79-82)

Ironic this speech may be, but it articulates a theory of friendship that resonates uneasily with the kind of generosity displayed by Timon. Dipping “in the same dish”, or eating together, has been a significant symbol of friendship, brotherhood or allegiance throughout countless cultures across thousands of years; the Last Supper, as mentioned earlier, provides just one example of a meal which symbolises companionship. But in the Stranger’s words, feeding becomes an act of patronage, a mercantile act in which Timon purchases the part of the body nurtured by his food and drink, just as Shylock purchases part of Antonio. This impression is confirmed by Flamineo, Timon’s loyal steward, when he curses the ingratitude displayed by Lucullus towards his benefactor in his hour of need. Flamineo imagines the meat given by Timon to Lucullus as if it were still physically inside his body.

Flamineo. O, may diseases only work upon't!
 And when he's sick to death, let not that part of nature
 Which my lord paid for, be of any power
 To expel sickness, but prolong his hour! (3.1.58-61)

The First Stranger remarks that he cannot call himself Timon's friend because he has not tasted Timon, not been marked by his bounty. Friendship, according to this formulation, works alongside feeding and giving; a friend is one who feeds another. But as we have seen, feeding can slide into devouring, and the bonds of affection and of mercantile exchange are not as separate as one might like to believe.

In paralleling Christ's sacrifice, the drama imagines a form of giving for which there can be no return. The kind of giving envisaged by this parallel would enthrone Timon in splendid isolation, safe from any implication of *need*, or of desire. But the frenzy of giving in which he indulges has a tendency to imply its opposite, and critics have long found something deeply suspect about Timon's giving. In pouring out gifts Timon automatically places the recipients in a position of inequality, of indebtedness. One of the noticeable characteristics of Timon's debtors is their use of the language of enslavement and bondage.

Timon. I'll pay the debt and free him.
Messenger. Your lordship ever binds him.
Timon. Commend me to him. I will send his ransom;
 And, being enfranchised, bid him come to me. (1.1.105-08)

In setting Ventidius free, Timon enslaves him; the moment at which Ventidius is "enfranchised" is also the moment at which he becomes liable to obey Timon's summons, to do his bidding. In refusing to accept reimbursement of the ransom money, as he does in the next scene, Timon refuses to liberate him from an eternal debt. Ventidius confirms this, remarking, "I am bound/ To your free heart" (1.2. 4-5). "Free" here can be glossed as "generous", but it also puns on the contrast established; his generosity Timon makes other men slaves to his "freedom", ensuring that their actions and tongues can never again be used with liberty. The embittered, clear-sighted misanthrope Apemantus proves himself fully aware of this burgeoning economy when he steadfastly repulses Timon's many attempts at generosity, recognising that to accept anything from Timon would be to place himself in an impossible position. "Yes," Apemantus tells the

poet, “he [Timon] is worthy of thee, and to pay thee for thy labour: he that loves to be flattered is worthy of the flatterer” (1.1.229-31). The poet, in other words, is offering a service for which Timon is paying the appropriate fee. Apemantus understands this: “I scorn thy meat; ’twould choke me, fore I should e’er flatter thee” he tells Timon (1.2.38-39); and again, “No, I’ll nothing – for if I should be bribed too, there would be none left to rail upon thee and then thou wouldst sin the faster” (1.2.456-47). By allowing Timon to feed him, Apemantus would be placing himself in the automatic position of a flatterer, enslaving his liberty to speak as he pleases. The sceptical problem of praise identified by the Poet, described above, is the same as the problem recognised by both Apemantus and by Timon. But whereas Timon tries to behave as a god, giving all while taking nothing, Apemantus chooses to opt out of the economy completely, refusing to give or to take anything at all.

Timon’s attempt at giving all is thus more akin to Mauss’s description of potlatching, of aggressive giving that attempts to buy up and to devour the other, than to Derrida’s vision of the perfect, impossible gift. The frenzy of giving in which Timon indulges is so extreme, so near to parody, that it also has a tendency to imply its opposite, the frenzy of taking all. It is through this frenzy of total giving that the *peripeteia* of the play is realised, the great crisis that brings the fantasy of allness, of total having and total giving, sliding into the catastrophe of negation and loss which underscores the second half of the tragedy. *Timon* dramatises the fantasy of a wealth that is infinite and endless, a giving which could go on forever, and it is the fracturing of this fantasy which proves catastrophic. Yet this is a knowledge which Timon has disowned: his steward has tried to tell him many times that his wealth is not as boundless as he imagines, but Timon will not listen. In this sense, his plunge into nothingness is his own doing. Why? Well, Timon himself hints to us, early on in the play.

Timon. O you gods, think I, what need we have any friends if we
should ne’er have need of ’em? ... Why, I have often wished
myself poorer that I might come nearer to you.
(1.2.93-95; 98-99)

Here is the answer to the puzzling question: *why* does Timon not realise that his wealth is not great enough to stand up to the demands he subjects it to? The steward Flavius certainly attempts to warn him about the perilous state of his

finances; only a few lines later, we find him lamenting in despair that Timon refuses to hear him, apparently refusing the knowledge of his own rapidly emptying purse.

Flavius. He commands us to provide and give great gifts,
And all out of an empty coffer;
Nor will he know his purse or yield me this:
To show him what a beggar his heart is,
...
That what he speaks is all in debt – he owes
For every word.
...
Happiest is he that has no friend to feed,
Than such that do e'en enemies exceed.
I bleed inwardly for my lord. (1.2.195-98; 201-02; 206-08)

Flavius explains to us exactly why Timon will not know his purse; it is because to know the emptiness of his purse is to know the emptiness of something more, to know himself a beggar to the very heart. He is one who in giving indebts himself, encouraging others to feed upon him. This is the other face of Timon, the one to which Coppélia Kahn gestures when she reads him as a suitor to Fortune, not as a patron alone. Timon's relationship with others is one of *need*: to him, to be a friend is quite literally to be a friend in need; needy. On the one hand, he practises a form of giving which distances him from others, setting him apart from their mercantile economy by casting him as an aloof figure, immune to the *desire* experienced by others. On the other hand, his refusal to accept any form of repayment binds them to him, consuming them. The terrifying ease with which the need or desire of Timon's debtors turns into a hungry drive to consume is the same as the need which Timon identifies as part of his own actions, part of the raging desire to consume which marks his enslavement of others, and the position into which he falls of absolute need. No wonder that Timon will not "know" his purse. He has "often wished [himself] poorer"; often *wished* to find himself in that position of absolute bankruptcy, dependency and need into which his financial ruin plunges him. Janet Adelman remarks of Lear that his actions in giving away all his kingdom create for him a position of acute need: "in giving his daughters control over the extended body that is his kingdom, Lear would make them his mothers, deliberately putting himself in the position of infantile need from which he will experience the rest of the play" (116). Timon does much the

same thing, giving way to the fantasy of absolute and total need which is the other face and shadow of the play's formulation of the desire to give one's all. The play depicts desire as a raging need to consume. But underscoring Timon's giving is a fear of being consumed, not just by the other's hunger, but by a raging and unsatisfied hunger *for* the other – of being consumed, we might say, by one's own desire. The face of that other, its mouth gaping open, is his own. We might compare *Coriolanus*, that other tragedy about a man profoundly alienated and alienating, whose relationships are based on a form of perverse giving that covers and screens a raging hunger and desire, consuming self and other and world and all. "Anger's my meat: I sup upon myself/ And so shall starve with feeding" (4.2.50-51)

What is this terrifying, polarised state of need, into which Timon, Lear and Coriolanus are plunged and in which they seem simultaneously threatened by the experience of being desired and the experience of desire? It appears to rest upon a dialectic of desire, the simultaneous need for the other and need to consume them, in which the differences between desire and appetite become increasingly elided. Chapter 3 looks briefly at theories of emerging subjectivity in relation to scepticism (the lengthy literary tradition in which differences between inwardness and outward face are experienced, opening up a gap or absence within the self; the changing understanding of what knowledge is, so that knowledge becomes the place of difference and of absence between one thinking subject and another, rather than union and absorption into the divine). This sketches ways in which an unstable discourse of *difference* starts to emerge. It is a discourse that has existed within literary representations of consciousness well before the Reformation, but which increasingly responds under intense religious and political pressure to the early modern "crisis" of scepticism, which makes central to experience that uncertainty, sometimes comic but more often corrosively anxious, about the space opening up between the knowing subject and the object that is known.

What interests me about these theories of a specifically modern subjectivity is the way in which they resonate with the kind of dialectic of desire explored by Shakespeare's late tragedies; the way in which they gesture towards the idea of a particular paradigm of tragedy that reflects a simultaneous drive to

consume the other and a terror of being consumed by that other, which in the Cartesian or Hegelian (or indeed Freudian) narratives might be understood as a problematic of subjectivity, a way of being held in place by monstrous and terrifying forces whose demands, seemingly so impossibly opposed, structure themselves so easily along the polarised positions to which tragedy lends itself. The movement towards negation staged by *Timon* seems to reflect something of the terror which is presented by the phantom of nothingness, a monstrous shadow of absence and deferral found at the heart of an existence predicated on difference and desire which threatens to swallow up world and self, to plunge the subject into a tragic and infinite vortex of unmaking which finds no end. Desire is *de facto* a perpetual awareness of lack (because for something to be desired, it must first be found wanting). What *Timon* dramatises is an illusory state of *allness*, of plenitude, whose other face is the gaping mouth of raging desire that invests the other with the power to fulfil a fundamental lack, or loss of wholeness, and thus demands no less than the other's all.

In this way, *Timon* explores a sceptical problematic that approaches the question of how to negotiate with a world experienced as treacherous, in the same moment making itself fully available in the magic of bounty that translates the beloved to a state of jouissance, of absolute plenitude, only in the next moment to withdraw, to make itself unavailable. But it is also clear that Timon's attempt to play Fortune, to make *himself* fully available, is itself another way of eliding the difference of the other, thus threatening both the difference *of* that other and, ultimately, that space of difference in which the self makes itself known. In this play, the forms and shapes of tragedy as a dramatic genre, the great movement from all to nothing, towards negation itself, allows Shakespeare to explore what it is about that polarisation that is itself tragic. If the play explores a crisis of anxiety over such a dialectic of desire, then its first half dramatises the attempt to consume the other totally. But when the play confronts Timon with a refusal, the demand for the other's all that is rejected and denied, it is his response that it itself tragic in its very nihilism. Its absolute sceptical denial of the possibility that any form of mutual acknowledgement, any dialogue, might still be possible, repels and alienates friend with foe, Alcibiades and Flavius with the suitors, beggars and parasites. It is present in the way that

Timon turns language, the means of communication and acknowledgement, into an instrument and medium of nothing more than cursing; endless cursing, until at last language has outlived itself, consuming itself. Speak and be hanged, he says. "For each true word, a blister, and each false/ Be as a cantherizing to the root o'th'tongue,/ Consuming it with speaking" (5.2.17-19). And at the end of this, his last scene, he makes his final exit with a continuation of this idea, a destruction of language and any healing power of mutuality that it might once have possessed. "Lips, let sour words go by, and language end" (5.2.105).

"Let language end". I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter that *Timon*, while it has prompted various critics to see it as a very great tragedy indeed, has also frequently alienated its audiences with its implacable coldness and misanthropy, its insistence on holding its readers, critics and audiences at arm's length (so like *Coriolanus*; so unlike the appeal made to us by *Lear*). And what I want to suggest, at the last, is that in *Timon* a particular form of tragedy is revealed as alienation, an alienation whose disappointed scepticism reacts with violence against the suggestion that any forms of availability or of mutuality, not based on the kind of total union and consumption that has been denied, might be sufficient. If subjectivity is itself a recognition of mortality, then Timon's final embrace of nothing, of negation, does something slightly different.

Why, I was writing of my epitaph;
It will be seen tomorrow. My long sickness
Of health and living now begins to mend
And nothing brings me all things. (5.2.70-73)

It does not recognise, but rather embraces death in a way that consummates it, expresses a nihilistic being-for-death as the last expression of that raging desire, the desire that is itself predicated upon a *refusal* to acknowledge. Nothing brings him "all" things, but it is precisely this desire for *all* that the play has cast into such ethical doubt in the first instance. It reveals the degree to which this play, as a tragedy of nihilism, and a tragedy whose dramaturgy itself exploits that movement towards an alienating *nothing*, stages a response that is itself a wilful blinding, a failure, or refusal, or inability to recognise, which is tragic. It is this response which, if it cannot be avoided or overcome, must necessarily and inevitably result in tragedy. In such a state of bitter sceptical alienation, the

encounter that this cankered and corrupted language offers is a learning to curse.
If this is where tragedy finds itself at the last, then indeed let language end.

Part II: History

Introduction

Paradigms of Tragedy

When considering the cultural reception of Shakespeare over the past four hundred years, it is clear that only *King Lear* has made any serious inroads into the comprehensive cultural dominance enjoyed by *Hamlet* across the fields of Shakespearean criticism, performance, readership and general popular awareness. *Hamlet* bestrides the Shakespearean horizon like a colossus. It is the “most popular of Shakespeare’s plays for readers and theater audiences” (Mowat and Werstine par. 1), and “the world’s most filmed story after Cinderella” (McKernan and Terris, qtd. in Thompson and Taylor 17). Bradley and Worthington remark: “It is estimated that every minute of the day, [*Hamlet*] is being staged somewhere in the world” (par. 1) and Thompson and Taylor remark in the introduction to their Arden edition that “by the 1990s, the average number of publications *every year* on *Hamlet*, as recorded in the *Shakespeare Quarterly Annual Bibliography*, was running at well over 400” (1-2). *King Lear*’s impact is skewed by its absence from the stage in favour of Tate’s adaptation for most of the eighteenth century and well into the beginning of the nineteenth. But as Shakespeare’s *Lear* gradually reclaimed the stage from Tate’s more upbeat version, the play also steadily began to increase its profile within Shakespearean criticism, to the point where one prominent Shakespearean critic has argued at length that *Lear* has now toppled *Hamlet* from its throne. “There seems no doubt that *Hamlet*, as a central point of reference in Shakespeare’s work, had a long period of dominance, roughly between 1800 and 1960, and that since then *King Lear* has displaced it” (Foakes, “Displacement” 263). Foakes sees this displacement partly as the result of a change in critical reception of *Lear*. Interpretations have increasingly moved away from the redemptionist readings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (epitomised by Bradley, who asked rhetorically: “Should we not be at least as near the truth if we called this poem *The Redemption of King Lear*...?”). Instead, they have tended to move toward the more “cheerless, dark and deadly” interpretations typical of the 1960s and 70s, epitomised in their turn by Jan Kott’s visionary essay “*King Lear*

or *Endgame*". Kott reads the play against Beckett's tragicomedy and the Theatre of Cruelty as a tragedy of the grotesque. For him, the play is less a journey towards redemption than a blistering exposé of an absurd universe, in which the possibility of meaningful resistance to the indifferently cruel "absolute" is reduced in Gloucester's failed attempt at suicide to "a circus somersault on an empty stage" (149). Nor was this change in critical direction confined to the page. Kott's essay influenced Peter Brook's existentialist 1962 stage production, while Grigori Kozintsev's film *Korol Lir* (1971) shot a bleakly nihilistic *Lear* in black and white to the sound of a janglingly discordant score by Shostakovich.

R.A. Foakes' assessment of *Lear*'s new-found dominance is disputed by Thompson and Taylor, editors of the new Arden *Hamlet*, who maintain that their play retains its cultural pre-eminence (citing, for example, the typical 400 publications produced on *Hamlet* every year, as opposed to *Lear*'s 200). But the point of real interest must surely remain in the idea that these two plays are in competition at all, and not only for the title of Shakespeare's most popular tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet* must also have a claim to stake here) but for the title of Shakespeare's "greatest" tragedy. The two plays have effectively become staked against each other for the title of "most tragic" of the tragedies. And this is a very odd phenomenon, because the plays are, in many ways, strikingly dissimilar. For all that *Hamlet* is now popularly considered to be the flower of Shakespeare's tragic achievement, the quintessence of what Shakespearean tragedy is or can be, it is as different from *Lear*, its great competitor, as hawk from handsaw. The nineteenth century critic F.S. Boas included *Hamlet* among what he called the "problem plays", a term which we still use today when discussing *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*. His inclusion of *Hamlet* here, rather than among the tragedies, reflects his uneasy sense of its *difference*; the difficulty of assimilating it into the category of "tragedy" at all. If *King Lear* and *Hamlet* stand as rival colossi on the Shakespearean tragic stage, they stand there because they represent fundamentally different kinds of tragedy, reflecting competing understandings of what Shakespearean tragedy is, or "should" be.

If *Lear* and *Timon* represent a certain vision or paradigm of tragedy as nihilism, and push that vision to its extremest edge, then this paradigm of

tragedy is not in any sense the only one available. On the contrary, a greater comprehension of the different conceptions of tragedy and the tragic available to Shakespeare, the different generic forms emerging on to the early modern stage for which he wrote, can help to understand more about how they enable him to respond in often very different ways to the seismic cultural changes of the age. Of all these changes, the challenges of scepticism are clearly a matter of very considerable preoccupation, with their corrosive effect upon faith in established political and religious institutions, and cultural understandings and modes of thought both philosophical and vernacular; the available grounds of knowledge, in fact, on which any kind of certain relationship of men and women with the world around them could be based. If tragedy as nihilism, exemplified by *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*, dramatises one particular response to the threat of loss and of liminality posed by scepticism in one of its guises, then in this context a tragedy like *Hamlet* sits oddly alongside them. *Hamlet* undoubtedly displays a concern and a preoccupation with the same sceptical problematic of what Cavell calls the “vertigo” or “groundlessness” of the sceptic. It reflects the same horror at the sceptical vision of loss and liminality implicit in its articulation of what is “not to be”, to be subjected as this “quintessence of dust”. But its prince, frozen and melancholic in the midst of his disjointed time, his “words, words, words”, is emphatically no Lear or Timon. His attempts at ranting (“Bloody, bawdy villain!”) bring not the nihilistic grandeur of *Lear* but rather irony and self-disgust. If the nihilistic misanthropy of *Timon*’s tragedy is dangerously close to the satirical tradition from which it emerges, then Hamlet is painfully aware of that potential for satire. His brief attempts at nihilistic tragedy lapse back into the very different response for which he is famous: a tragic response, not of nihilism but of *mournfulness*. He is, after all, the “melancholy prince”.

Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*: Benjamin and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

One of the most significant theories of the relationship between tragedy and mournfulness is located in the work of the early twentieth century German-Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin. It is contained in the early monograph that originated as his doctoral thesis: the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* or *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, first published in 1928. Benjamin is probably better known today for his influence on aesthetics,

modernism and the Frankfurt School than for his efforts as a critic of early modern drama. But while some of his later works became enormously influential, most notably the 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” and the unfinished collection of writings *The Arcades Project*, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* remained Benjamin’s only fully-completed monograph at the time of his death as a fugitive from Nazism in 1940.

The Origin of German Tragic Drama is an extraordinary work of criticism by any standards. Divided into three parts (“Epistemo-Critical Prologue”, “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” and “Allegory and Trauerspiel”), it explores the origins of the German baroque tragedy of Gryphius, Lohenstein, Opitz and their contemporaries, situating it in relation to the European theatre of the baroque. The two most frequent references to earlier writers of tragedy are to Calderón and, most of all, to Shakespeare. Benjamin’s thesis proposes that a mistake has been made in judging these baroque dramas by the Aristotelian standards of classical tragedy, arguing that *Tragödie* (classical or Aristotelian tragedy) and *Trauerspiel* (baroque tragedy, literally a “mourning-play”) represent two entirely separate artistic forms. Judged by the critical standards of Aristotle (many of his rules adopted and coarsened), baroque *Trauerspiel* appears as a crude parody of tragedy. However, Benjamin points out that notions such as the unity of time and place have no relevance to *Trauerspiel*. He also scoffs at the notion that an artistic form can ever be determined by its effect (such as the *catharsis* of pity and fear), or that Aristotle ever intended such a universal conclusion to be drawn. Drawing a fundamental distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, he therefore argues that these melancholy baroque dramas should be considered from a critical point of view as an entirely separate genre. The fundamental contrast, as the *Ursprung* sees it, is that where classical tragedy is rooted in myth, the baroque *Trauerspiel* is rooted in *history*. History, or historical life, is its proper object and content, and it dramatises historical life as a state of mournfulness. *Trauerspiel*’s content is related to tragedy, but its form is not that of classical *Tragödie*. Rather, it is the form of a mourning-play.

Benjamin’s conception of a different kind of tragedy – tragedy as endless mournfulness, rather than as cataclysmic resolution – certainly can, and has, proved helpful for readings of *Hamlet*, the quintessential Shakespearean tragedy

about mourning. Recently, however, critical attention has begun to turn to the significance of *Trauerspiel* as a lens through which to read Shakespearean *history* plays. *Trauerspiel* offers a way of exploring further the relationship between history and tragedy, and a new way in which to read the relationship between the content and the form of this newly emerging dramatic genre of the history play.

The Early Modern History Play

Unlike tragedy, which has its roots in classical Greece, the “history play” as we tend to conceive of it today is largely a product of the early modern stage. Heminges and Condell, the editors of the Shakespeare First Folio, must take some credit for their unprecedented elevation of the history play to a status equivalent to that of the more venerable Tragedy and Comedy, and thus some responsibility for the enormous influence of the Folio upon our subsequent received understanding of what a history play is. Broadly speaking, the influential system of classification installed by the First Folio has experienced two main movements. Several of the comedies have undergone reclassification into the new categories of romance, tragicomedy, “problem plays” or even “late plays”. To complement this, criticism and stage productions usually now acknowledge the more tragic elements of these plays. Yet while certain of the history plays, such as *Richard II* and *Richard III*, are now routinely acknowledged as strongly tragic in character, by and large the category of ‘history plays’ as listed in the Folio remains unchanged. If it is by now possible without need for explanation or justification to refer to *Richard III* as a tragedy, it is even less controversial to call it a history. The histories, far more than the comedies or tragedies, remain categorically intact.

Why this should be so is not immediately obvious. Not only could some of the histories justifiably be reclassified as tragedies, but the category of history play could itself arguably be extended to include plays such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and some of the Roman plays. One answer is that Shakespeare is said to have authored some of the earliest “English history plays” in the general sense that he wrote plays which take as their primary source the chronicles of English history in order to dramatise a loosely factual (or “responsible”, as Emrys Jones puts it) account of the narrative of English history. He does this without overtly

prioritising a visible political or moral agenda, an immediate contrast with an earlier play such as John Bale's polemical *Kynge Johan*. In the "history plays" Shakespeare selects, edits, compresses and adds to his source material, but the task of telling "what happened" is undertaken seemingly more soberly, less expediently, than Bale's use of historical narrative as propaganda. *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* do not draw upon English chronicle history. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* have a much stronger claim here, but *Lear* draws as much as upon popular myth and Spenserian poetry as upon Holinshed, while *Macbeth* – which has by far the strongest claim of the two – is heavily influenced by treatises on witchcraft. Yet the ramifications of this editorial decision exist to this day. Only recently, in *Shakespeare and Scotland*, Willy Maley has argued that one of the reasons for the continuing critical neglect of Scotland in Shakespearean criticism today (as opposed to the attention given to Wales, and particularly to Ireland) is that Shakespeare's most obviously "Scottish" play has been de-politicised by its inclusion among the tragedies instead of among the histories of Britain. This has led to a tendency to consider it as a morality play, to place Macbeth himself alongside tragic heroes like Othello and Lear. Its inclusion among the histories would, Maley argues, have led to more topical and political readings of the play, more of a focus on its nationalist dynamics and on what it has to say about early modern conceptions of, and anxieties about, English and Scottish national identity (a way of reading to which the histories lend themselves, and which has received considerable critical attention). The political geographer Stuart Elden has done something similar with regard to *King Lear*: in a forthcoming article in *Literature and Law* (2013) he undertakes a reading of the play in which he focuses on the issue of territory, of what the play can tell us about early modern conceptions of territorial and national perimeters. The way in which we understand a play's generic form can, and clearly often does, have significant repercussions for the way in which its content is read.

History and Tragedy

There is undoubtedly a close relationship between Shakespeare's writing of history and his writing of tragedy. This is particularly obvious in *Richard III*, *Richard II* and *Macbeth*, but it is certainly not confined to these three. Michael Hattaway points out that one reason for this lies in the histories' focus on

particular reigns. “Generic classification was bound to be difficult given that most of the English histories centre their action on the reign of a monarch, the narrative ending with his death. It was therefore inevitable that ‘history’ plays were going to be closely affiliated with tragedy. Some were initially labelled as such” (3).²⁰ But the histories’ focus on particular sovereigns, their troubles and their deaths, is one feature that relates them to tragedy. As Shakespearean criticism has developed, so too has our understanding broadened beyond a focus on the sovereign as protagonist, as (tragic) hero. Greater attention has increasingly been paid both to the more silent figures clustered around the edges of page and stage, and to the sophisticated exploration of historiography itself which the histories encourage. The legacy of new historicism, of cultural materialism and Marxism, in particular the work of Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, has drawn attention to how much Shakespeare’s histories have to tell us about history as political process. Andrew Hadfield, Philip Schwyzer, John Kerrigan and Willy Maley, among others, have explored from a variety of different perspectives what Shakespeare’s histories have to tell us about the construction of nationalism itself. Meanwhile, feminist critics Phyllis Rackin and Jean E. Howard have emphasised how this ideology becomes increasingly gendered and patriarchal, as powerful figures such as Margaret of Anjou and Joan La Pucelle give way to the pliant Princess Katherine. Unsurprisingly, the plays maintain a central focus on their royal protagonists and the struggles and sufferings undergone by them. “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown”, complains Henry IV (2 *Henry IV* 3.1.31), echoed closely by his son after him on the eve of battle in *Henry V*. But acknowledgements of the more widespread impact of royal decision-making are never far from the surface. Lear, conscience-stricken, declares that he as monarch has never paid enough attention to the sufferings of the silent multitude: “O, I have ta’en / Too little care of this” (3.4.32-33). And Michael Williams, the passionately outspoken soldier in *Henry V*, speaks some of Shakespeare’s most memorable lines on the subject of

²⁰ David Scott Kastan points out in *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time*, 38, however, that practices regarding Elizabethan title-pages were so inconsistent that no serious critical deductions can be made regarding the reasons for which one history play might be labelled a tragedy rather than another.

the mutilated bodies of the king's poorer countrymen, the severed pieces of which will rise up and clamour for justice (4.1.134-46).

As we can see, then, Shakespearean history bears a close relationship to tragedy. However, some of the histories also have a certain affinity with comedy. *Henry V*, for example, concludes in a marriage rather than a death, while *1 Henry IV*, dominated as it is by the triumphant Falstaff, has more about it of comedy than of tragedy. In this sense, the histories are not completely removed from epic, which also tends to have scope for a variety of genres and modes. The comedy of *1 Henry IV* gives way to the much more sober mood of *2 Henry IV*, and Falstaff's impudent company all meet their various ends as *Henry V* heads towards its apparently triumphal conclusion. Epic also helps us to think about different conceptions of time. It opens in the middle of the action, looking back to find the causes of its events rooted firmly in the past, yet also gesturing forward to a future far beyond the particular events and conflicts of which it tells. While epic focuses on particular events – journeys, wars, conflicts, loves and losses – and on particular heroic figures, it also retains one eye on the future. It maintains a powerful sense that the actions of the protagonist are important, not just as the now-legendary acts of individual heroism, but for the repercussions which they will have upon the future of whole tribes and the destinies of nations. Like epic, Shakespeare's histories open *in media res*, stretching forward and backward far beyond the boundaries of the specific events of which they tell, and with a powerful sense of great swathes of history. They evoke the long shadow cast by past actions, and the crucial importance of the choices of monarchs, not only for themselves or even for their peoples but for nations in times to come. Each single episode falls within a much larger historical epoch. Scholars continue to debate to what degree Shakespeare might have understood himself to be writing sequels, trilogies or tetralogies.²¹ But one of the reasons why it remains plausible to argue that the plays *can* legitimately be understood to work together and to stem from a single conception of English history must come from Shakespeare's powerful sense, evident in every one of the plays, that no single episode of history ever stands alone.

²¹ For more on this see Emrys Jones.

History as Tragedy

What is it, though, about Shakespeare's understanding of history that presses it increasingly into a whole new aesthetic and dramatic form? A partial answer to this question starts to emerge in the work of certain influential Shakespearean critics, who have argued from a variety of individual approaches that Shakespeare understands the form of history *itself* to be tragic. One of the most influential of these was the critic A.P. Rossiter in *Angel With Horns*, a collection of lectures published posthumously under the title of his lecture on *Richard III*. Writing after the publication of E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* and *Shakespeare's History Plays*, Rossiter suggests that *Richard III* responds to and destabilises the "Tudor myth" found in Holinshed, in which history is understood as an orderly course of events guided by divine justice, rewards and punishments. Opening *in media res*, *Richard III* begins in the midst of a bloody and bewildering narrative of endless deaths, betrayals and lamentations, a world of "absolute and hereditary moral ill" in which all the living are walking damned and not a soul exempt from taint. For Rossiter, the play's pattern emerges from the conflict of two historical myths: the orthodox Tudor myth of history as divinely-controlled moral order and the gigantic, laughing Vice-figure or Senecan tyrant of Richard, the angel with horns, who destabilises the naively optimistic promise of Christian history. He closes his essay by remarking that in this play Shakespeare destabilises the Tudor myth by writing comic rather than moral history, which takes him to tragedy. What we might garner from Rossiter's understanding, then, is a reading in which Shakespearean history dramatises an increasing scepticism about the *meaningfulness* of history. Is it tragic because it starts *in media res*, in the midst of a particularly dark and grim chapter in which dark deeds are being bloodily purged as history moves towards a purer chapter? Or is it tragic because of an increasing and awful suspicion that the actors of history are playing their parts in a gigantic and meaningless farce, one in which history itself will have the last laugh?

A decade later, the Polish critic Jan Kott also argued that for Shakespeare there is something fundamentally tragic about history itself. "Shakespeare's concept of history is of a different kind... History unfolds on the stage, but is never merely enacted. It is not a background or a setting. It is itself the

protagonist of tragedy. But what tragedy?" (36). Like Rossiter, his understanding of Shakespearean history as a particular form of tragedy derives from the tension between a belief in history as process – history as the unfolding of a meaningful if sometimes destructive and traumatic progress towards an ultimately redemptive goal – and the developing scepticism which gradually loses confidence in this transcendent view of history. In Kott's reading, Shakespeare dramatises the cyclical nature of history, where each chapter (structured around the reign of a particular monarch) opens and closes at exactly the same point. By allowing history to turn full circle, the faces of kings and usurpers become blurred. They blend into one another, all cogs in the wheels of history's Grand Mechanism. Kott suggests that there are two fundamental types of historical tragedy. The first of these he understands as a Hegelian and partially a Marxist view of history, which suggests that history does have meaning, has a rational or intelligible direction in which it moves. Here, the tragedy consists in the terrible price that history exacts as it rolls relentlessly forward, crushing under its wheels those who help it to advance by being in advance of their time. But he argues in the passage below that there is a second type, much nearer to Shakespeare's conception of historical tragedy. (Here, Kott's metaphor of the "mole of history" originates in Marx's description of history as a mole who constantly digs in the earth, arising from Hamlet's reference to the Ghost as an "old mole" working in the earth.)

There is another kind of historical tragedy, originating in the conviction that history has no meaning and stands still, or constantly repeats its cruel cycle; that it is an elemental force, like hail, storm, or hurricane, birth and death. A mole digs in the earth but will never come to its surface. ... A mole has its dreams. For a long time it fancied itself the lord of creation, thinking that earth, sky and stars had been created for moles, that there is a mole's God, who made moles and promised them a mole-like immortality. But suddenly the mole has realized that it is just a mole, that the earth, sky and stars had not been created for it. A mole suffers, feels and thinks, but its sufferings, feelings and thoughts cannot alter its mole's fate. It will go on digging in the earth, and the earth will go on burying it. It is at this point that the mole has realized that it is a tragic mole. (37)

Kott's reading identifies in the Shakespearean history play an experience which might be described as one of profound scepticism. Like Rossiter, he finds

something cruelly farcical about the sadistic indifference of the universe (“earth, sky and stars”) towards the weary toils of its inhabitants, whose confidence in their own meaningfulness, their own centrality within the universe, is bound up with their faith in the promise of the universe to them, its “presentness” to and for them. Kott’s mole of history becomes tragic when it becomes conscious that the process of historical life, as a function of the existence of “earth, sky and stars”, is indifferent and does not exist in relation to the mole itself, once so confident of its axiomatic significance within this grand narrative. Thus the mole’s confidence in the capacity of its actions (its digging) to have meaning – which would be to make the world crucially “available” to it – is ended. But its existence, and its digging, do not end with this realisation. The mole is therefore presented with a difficulty: how is it to continue digging when that digging has ceased to have the capacity to give it access to the earth in which it exists, to make that earth present to it? Kott and Rossiter differ from Benjamin in their belief that Shakespeare’s histories gradually reveal a world in which the absurd is the absolute, and the absolute is all there is. It is impossible to make that universe present because it does not care; will never care. History is the form in which the mole’s impossible conundrum of how to go on performing its actions when all possibility of meaningful action has ceased to exist. In this sense, Kott’s reading of history is not altogether removed from his reading of *King Lear*, except that he finds in history an *endlessness* that is not there in *Lear* (although the conundrum of how to make an end is, of course, very powerfully present in *Endgame*). Where tragedy dramatises an ending, history lingers on, emptied of meaning yet unable to leave the stage.

One of the features of this understanding of Shakespearean history that is perhaps the most interesting is the way that it finds in the plays the staging of a very similar tragic experience to the experience of tragic scepticism: an experience of loss and disappointment, sometimes of abandonment, as the world draws back and becomes unavailable. Kott reads this as recognition of the sadistic indifference of the universe and its historical cycle; Cavell as the groundlessness of scepticism; Benjamin as the increasing unavailability of the divine presence in the world, of access to the divine “beyond”. In all of these readings, what is at stake is the terrible sense of loss or unavailability of

meaningfulness. The sceptic is confronted with a widening gap between subject and object, producing a crisis of meaningfulness: how is he to communicate with the world, to make that world once more present to him, when it is fast becoming remote and unreachable? Kott's mole's confiding faith in the universe's existence *for* it, the significance of its suffering, feeling and thinking for and within that universe, is emptied out as it recognises that not only are its actions and its sufferings physically powerless to alter its fate, but they also evoke no corresponding recognition or response within a universe far removed, in which that mole is no longer an axis of meaning. In Benjamin's reading, baroque tragedy responds to a similar consciousness of the unavailability of a realm beyond the subject; its withdrawal or absconding beyond his capacity to be in a state of meaningful communion or dialogue with it. But in Benjamin's view, this is a function of the understanding of historical life itself, to which he argues that baroque tragedy responds.

History and *Trauerspiel*

As mentioned earlier, Benjamin sees classical tragedy (*Tragödie*) and early modern tragedy, or *Trauerspiel*, as fundamentally distinct dramatic forms. He reads these mournful early modern dramas as plays that emerge from a much older medieval religious tradition, and which inherit much of their form and content from medieval aesthetic and dramatic forms. However, he suggests that they *also* respond crucially to a cultural crisis of their own time: the crisis of the Reformation. Benjamin regards the crucially *mournful* conception and expression of history that he finds in the baroque *Trauerspiel* partly as its inheritance from a medieval religious understanding of postlapsarian world history by which he believes that medieval religious drama and aesthetic culture more generally are informed. Indeed, following the work of Franz Josef Mone he suggests that world history was seen by the medieval chroniclers as a great *Trauerspiel*, sometimes tragic in content but not so in form. Here, history is a mournful chronicle of life in and of the world, unfolding after, and in response to, the Fall. From this time forth, the unfolding of historical life becomes a "disconsolate chronicle of world-history opposed not to eternity but to the restoration of the timelessness of paradise" (92). This produces crucial structural distinctions relating to time: *Trauerspiel* stages fragments and broken shards of history, rather than charting

the enclosed narrative of myth. And because history is linear and endless, *Trauerspiel* ends not with the uncertain resolution of myth-based tragedy, but with an adjournment, a postponement.

Medieval Christian theology suggests that the Fall fractures the proximity of the divine and human worlds, resulting in the withdrawal of the divine presence behind a veil. It is in this moment that a crisis of knowledge and representation is first provoked, as the correspondence between word and thing, subject and object, form and meaning, is severed. Before the Fall, language is the divine language of creation, the same through which God speaks the world into being, and from which the Adamic language of naming is derived. It appears again at the beginning of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John: 1:1-14). The Fall fractures the correspondence between word and referent, meaning that the linguistic ability of the speaker to make either the world or, especially, the divine "beyond" present to him is badly damaged. The narrative of the Fall also presents this in terms of a crisis of *knowledge*: after eating of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, knowledge becomes not unity but separation, since that ability to know the world for good and evil is now based on an ability to recognise it (which is also to recognise separation). Crucially, however, Benjamin argues that human language and aesthetic forms of representation, however fallen and ruined, yet retain in themselves faint echoes of the divine language, the meaningful divine presence that is their truth-content. It is out of such an understanding that he differentiates the silences of tragedy from the obsessional, torrential rhetoric of *Trauerspiel* (its "words, words, words"). In addition, Benjamin argues that *Trauerspiel*'s melancholy preoccupation with objects and emblems (we might think of the skulls, books, mirrors, crowns and so on that become the focus for mournful contemplation on the early modern stage) is derived from the medieval allegorical-emblematic tradition, which is preoccupied with the gap that has opened up between a form and its truth-content.

Benjamin sees *Trauerspiel* emerging from the medieval religious dramatic and aesthetic forms in which historical life, language and forms of representation have been badly damaged in their capacity for meaningfulness in and of

themselves, but which nonetheless retain a certain capacity to gesture beyond themselves to the divine transcendence. The divine presence is veiled, yet that veil is often thin, as we might see for example at the abrupt transition near the end of the *Second Shepherds' Play* from the bickering and squabbling of the fully human, and in this instance highly *comic* world of the shepherds to the vision of the Incarnation at the end; the divine becomes revealed in, and through, the human as the shepherds' comic and unforced compassion gives way gently to the revelation of the divine. Medieval drama is, after all, very rarely tragic even when it is at its most serious, unlike the drama of the early modern period in which tragedy flourishes.

Benjamin reads in baroque tragedy a response to the cultural crisis of the Reformation, locating the baroque dramas of Shakespeare and Calderón within a specific historical moment of calamity. He argues that they are informed by the cultural landscape of post-Reformation Europe, a world in which the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone caused human actions to be "deprived of all value" (138). Nor was such a crisis confined to this doctrine, of course. Faith in the more widespread capacity of the forms, rites and ceremonies of the Church to communicate meaning and significance beyond themselves was starting to come under immense pressure. One central example resides in the language of the Mass, whose capacity to correspond directly with the divine language of creation, gesturing beyond the significance in and of itself to call into being the Real Presence, had been called into question. Other rites and ceremonies were gradually becoming eroded, yet left traces of themselves behind to remind the people of what they had lost. Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* provides a detailed case-study of the Reformation's attack on Purgatory and the cultural implications of such a loss. In Greenblatt's reading, *Hamlet* responds with profound mournfulness to a consciousness of extreme loss. Purgatory is a way of making the living and the dead still in some way present to one another, still directly and actively meaningful for one another. To lose Purgatory is to lose a means of communicating with the dead, and to have faith in the capacity of one's words to echo beyond the immanent world of the living. In response to this traumatic cultural shift appears a profound cultural mournfulness, a consciousness of something irretrievably lost. Under the lowering post-

Reformation skies, cut off from the transcendent divine timelessness, Benjamin's man of history remains trapped in time, mournfully contemplating the ruins of history.

Of all the profoundly disturbed and divided periods of European history, the baroque is the only one which occurred at a time when the authority of Christianity was unshaken. Heresy, the mediaeval road of revolt, was barred. ... Since...neither rebellion nor submission was practicable in religious terms, all the energy of the age was concentrated on a complete revolution of the content of life, while orthodox ecclesiastic forms were preserved. The only consequence could be that men were denied all real means of direct expression. ... [T]he dominant spiritual disposition...did not so much transfigure the world in them as cast a cloudy sky over its surface. Whereas the painters of the Renaissance knew how to keep their skies high, in the paintings of the baroque the cloud moves, darkly or radiantly, down towards the earth. (79)

Benjamin sees an affinity between baroque drama and the drama of the Middle Ages, arguing that baroque tragedy is a secularised form of the medieval Passion Play. But where Christ is the central character of the Passion Play, *Trauerspiel* takes as its protagonist the sovereign, who is the representative of history. The sovereign inherits the duality of Christ, his capacity to bring together human and divine worlds within himself. But the sovereign is tied to the world, and the world under these lowering baroque skies is becoming increasingly immanent, present only in and of itself. In the struggle between the divine and creaturely impulses, the monarch may be the highest creature of all, but he is still confined to their world.

One of the most interesting dimensions shared by Cavell, Benjamin and Kott is the way that all of them find in Shakespearean drama, whether tragical or historical, a particular tragic aesthetic that responds to a sense of profound and catastrophic *loss*, a loss which is experienced as the withdrawing of the subject's meaningful access to a realm beyond itself. (In Cavell, this "beyond" is known as the world or the other; in Kott, it is "earth, sky and stars" or world history itself; in Benjamin, it is the divine realm, the divine presence and truth). As we see, Benjamin suggests that this aesthetic emerges from the crisis of European history, the impact of the Reformation which, by denying the capacity of human "works" to produce any corresponding significance in the divine realm, effectively created a world "denied direct access to a beyond" (79). It is not,

therefore, particularly surprising that Benjamin's work should resonate so with Cavell's. Scepticism is after all a question of the individual's access to the realm beyond itself (although after Descartes that realm increasingly becomes located *within* the self, conceived in terms of a split consciousness, as well as outside it). And the rediscovery of scepticism for early modern Europe, as we know, emerged largely in relation to, and under the terrific pressure of, the Reformation itself, which Benjamin sees as a crucial catalyst for the development of the *Trauerspiel*.

Benjamin's interest in *Trauerspiel* arises from his interest in artistic form and representation. For him, *Trauerspiel* is the artistic form which most responds to the gap in *knowledge*, the gap opening up between objects and any form of corresponding significance or access to meaning. The preoccupation which he finds in the *Trauerspiel* with the emblematic tradition of melancholy object-contemplation (we might think of Hamlet with his skull, or Richard II with his mirror) is rooted in just such a concern with knowledge. Anthony Cascardi (a critic who has himself written extensively and substantially on Cavell and scepticism since the date of the article quoted) points out something very similar as he explores Benjamin's project in relation to *Hamlet* and Calderón's drama *La vida es sueño*.

Benjamin's interest in theatrical representation relates philosophically to the problem of form. ... Benjamin is confident that thought and knowledge must settle in concrete forms, crystallize around certain objects. These forms, as distinct from Platonic *ideas*, are not mere phenomena; they are, instead, the ways *in* which (and not simply *through* which) thought is able to exist at all. Hence the importance of history, the succession of actual human events, the fact of human agency, to the enterprise of knowledge itself; hence the profound, almost eerie intensity with which Benjamin focuses on objects, the irritants and containers of the life of the mind and of the feelings. ... The crisis of representation evident in a play like *La vida es sueño* is of a piece with the crisis of knowledge that can be placed, philosophically, in the seventeenth century. (4)

For Benjamin, then, the mournfulness that he sees as inherent to these *Trauerspiels* is a response to a gap opening up; a gap which is the space of knowledge, of access to truth itself. He finds in certain aspects of medieval aesthetic culture expressions of the mournfulness proper to this state, in which

the world, and the divine creative force within in, is no longer directly accessible to mankind. This, clearly, is not a state specific to the Reformation. But he suggests that early modern tragedy, emerging from a literary and dramatic tradition that included medieval religious drama and remained heavily influenced by it, responds to the crisis of the Reformation as to a force that empties actions of value (because of the doctrine of faith alone) and cuts mankind off even further from the hope of direct access to the divine “beyond”, provoking and intensifying a mood of tragic melancholy in response to such a cultural loss.

It is with this idea of history as *Trauerspiel*, then, that the next chapters turn to a closer engagement with Shakespeare’s history plays in order to explore their relation to the kind of paradigm of Shakespearean tragedy – tragedy as nihilism – explored in Part I. The fundamental focus of Part II is on the intersection between Shakespearean tragedy and history. The first chapter of Part II explores *Richard II*, which is of course both a tragedy *and* a history play, using it as a cornerstone between the two, before moving in chapter 4 to look at *Henry V*, a play still most usually considered as a ceremonial and triumphal play about the origins of English nationalism, rather than as a mournful play. The question here is how the new and emerging genre of the history play allows the articulation of a different response – mournfulness, rather than nihilism – to this problem of loss, the unavailability of the “beyond”, and of what the implications of this different response might be for our understanding of the way in which Shakespeare stages history and historical life itself.

Chapter 3: *Richard II*

Bolingbroke. Are you contented to resign the crown?

Richard. Ay, no. No, ay; for I must nothing be.

Therefore no 'no', for I resign to thee.

Now mark me how I will undo myself.

(*Richard II*, 4.1.199-202)

These lines occur during the famous deposition scene in *Richard II*, the scene in which political and emotional tensions are running high enough to reach breaking-point – literally so, when Richard hurls the mirror violently from him to see it shatter into a thousand shards. Indeed, the scene itself does not appear in any of the earlier quartos of the play, presumably excised to avoid the jangling of any heightened political sensitivities around the time of the succession crisis. In this climactic moment of supreme tension, an instant whose extreme consciousness of loss and undoing makes it fully tragic, occurs a fascinating experience of political and personal unmaking, articulated once again via the trope of “nothing”. Indeed, of all the recurring instances of the trope across Shakespeare, this appears to be the one in which the experience of sceptical liminality, of sudden and sickening groundlessness, is most powerfully and personally present. Echoes of this moment recur in the resonantly tragic *nothing* of *King Lear*, another play that questions what it might mean to reduce a man, and a king, to nothing, as well as in the more pensively mournful moments of reflection in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. But if *Richard II* foreshadows *Lear* here, responding to the same experience of sceptical groundlessness, then this moment emerges within a play whose response is somewhat different in emphasis. Where *Lear* responds to this sceptical crisis with an earth-shaking vision of tragic nihilism, *Richard II* lingers mournfully on, giving voice to endless lamentations while its unkinged and melancholy monarch refuses to die. What does it mean, Richard ponders, to relinquish everything which defines an identity and which holds that identity in place? “Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear ... Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.217-21). “Lear’s shadow,” responds the Fool immediately, and like *Lear*, *Richard II* plays endlessly with the notion of the “shadow”: a poor player, an imitation king. What might a king who is reduced to nothing look like, it asks, as Richard demands a mirror to examine the “shadow” of his no-longer-sovereign face?

Like *King Lear*, *Richard II* begins as a play that draws heightened, even exaggerated attention to the absolute power and magnificence of the sovereign's role; his "allness" (something of which this particular sovereign is himself acutely aware). The dramaturgy calls attention to it with scenes 1 and 3 of Act 1 (the dispute between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, and the tournament scene): two scenes in quick succession in which Richard's role as royal adjudicator is very formally displayed. The play presents Richard as a monarch clearly much invested in this role, enjoying both the power and distinction it gives him. His method of wielding this power proves often arbitrary (for example in his sentencing of the two contestants in 1.3). However, he rebukes Mowbray for suggesting that the king might display partiality towards his blood relation: "Such neighbour nearness to our sacred blood/ Should nothing privilege him nor partialize...He is our subject, Mowbray; so art thou" (1.1.119-22). Richard's words, while apparently emphasising his own freedom from prejudice, subtly reinforce the distinction between the king and his subjects; the monarch's "sacred blood" creates him as a species apart.

The play itself is characterised by a sense of confused abundance and excess: its lack of coherent emotional development is partially obscured by a copiousness of blood, of words, of theatricals. As is typical of a history play it is overshadowed by past events, by old quarrels and recent, unresolved bloodshed. The confused melee of accusations and declarations, in which the audience have a difficult time comprehending the allusions to past events let alone making judgements on who is speaking the truth, never resolves itself: its removal to the lists marks an attempt at finally resolving a poisonous issue. As Richard himself reminds Bolingbroke: "Farewell, my blood, which if today thou shed/ Lament we may, but not revenge thee dead" (1.3.57-58). Yet Richard himself is ultimately responsible for stopping the staged fight before it can begin: he wants to "purge this choler without letting blood" (1.1.153). As a stage-manager, Richard is as destructive and disastrous as in his other roles. Allowing his actors to gather together their energies for a tragic resolution, his action in stopping the fight at the last minute only to exile the participants simply causes the tragic energy to enter a state of temporary paralysis. The blood clots and clogs but is not purged.

Richard prevents the tragic progress, transforming it into a static tragicomedy without a resolution. There is no catharsis.

The king has always been enraged at any hint that his royalty does not make him all-powerful. In the very first scene of the play he tells Mowbray imperiously: "Lions make leopards tame" (1.1.174) when attempting to force him to lay down Bolingbroke's gauge. His realisation that he is impotent to force them to obey causes him to declare furiously: "We were not born to sue but to command" (1.1.196). Two scenes later he takes his pyrrhic revenge with his disastrous stage-management of the fight scene. Forcing the entire court to witness his power by allowing all the elaborate and ceremonial preparations to take place only to stop the fight at the last second, he seems bent on transforming inevitable tragedy into farce. It is this decision to replace bloodshed with banishment which ultimately allows his deposition and murder to take place. He delights in his own omnipotence, remaining indifferent to Mowbray's grief-stricken lamentations while removing four of the years with which he has sentenced Bolingbroke on a whim. His claim that he does so because he has read Gaunt's "grieved heart" in his eyes is, naturally enough, another exhibition of Richard's sense of his own omniscience. While Bolingbroke himself remarks with heavy irony on Richard's enjoyment of sovereign power ("Four lagging winters and four wanton springs/ End in a word, such is the breath of kings" (1.3.213-14)), Gaunt reminds the young king more bluntly of his limitations.

Gaunt. But little vantage shall I reap thereby,
 For ere the six years that he hath to spend
 Can change their moons and bring their times about
 My oil-dried lamp and time-bewasted light
 Shall be extinct with age and endless night,
 My inch of taper will be burnt and done,
 And blindfold Death not let me see my son.

Richard. Why, uncle, thou hast many years to live.

Gaunt. But not a minute, king, which thou canst give.

...

Thou canst help time to furrow me with age,
 But stop no wrinkle in his pilgrimage. (1.3.217-29)

Gaunt's sombre words spoil Richard's grand gesture and simultaneously remind him of a truth which he is particularly loth to recognise: his royal crown does not exempt him from being subject to the laws of time and decay. For Richard, to be

forced to recognise death is to be forced to recognise the problematic limitations of his own power. Gaunt's lines remind him of the presence of another power in his kingdom, one which Richard can "help" but not "stop". But Richard's identity is founded upon the concept that he is the king, and that the king is omnipotent. His brusque response, reasserting the remainder of Bolingbroke's sentence, emphasises once again his refusal and rage at suggestions that he might not, after all, be so all-powerful.

There is a profound connection for Richard between kingship, power, mortality and selfhood. Any infringement of power becomes a blow at the heart of who he is: the omnipotent one, the one who needs nothing and no-one, who does not recognise his kinship with others. The significance which Richard attributes to the relationship between the concept of death and his idea of his own power is confirmed in the long lamentation scene upon the shore, in which he hears of Bolingbroke's invasion. In this scene, rather than the idea of death bringing with it the unwelcome awareness of his power's limitations, here the announcement of his loss of power brings Richard's thoughts swinging towards death, and his claim that all the kings he can think of have been murdered.

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall and farewell king! (3.2.160-70)

Here, as in *Hamlet*, is a dramatic reflection upon the medieval *memento mori* tradition, the emblem of the skull that is death-in-life. Richard's conceit identifies himself, his crown and Death, all ringed in by each other, so that self is constituted out of a dialectic between royalty and mortality. The play's focus on the king's two bodies, which will be taken up once again in the deposition scene, starts to emerge here. The image of the player king on which several of Shakespeare's tragedies and histories draw, is also evoked: the stage manager

has become the puppet.²² But the sophisticated conceit goes beyond this. The image of the “hollow crown”, hollow even as it encircles the king’s temples, suggests that the king’s head is itself part of this emptiness, this void, a sense confirmed by the alternative meaning of “crown” as the crown of the head. The hollow king is given shape only by his crown: to lose that crown is to lose himself. The conceit also leaves ambiguous the exact positioning of Richard and Death within the crown. While the image of the besieged castle suggests that Death also encircles Richard like the crown, the image of the grinning death’s head is also clearly implied. In this image, the hollow king becomes constructed around Death, the skull within. Death does not peer over the king’s shoulder; it sits *inside* him, constituting a vacuum within. This image reinforces Richard’s sense of his own emptiness: he, the hollow king, is killed by Death boring through from within, eating away at him from inside. Beginning to emerge here is a sense of sovereignty constituted *around* nothing, around a space of death and absence.

The play has, in fact, specifically linked the two forces in a previous scene. In a lengthy speech punning on his own name, John of Gaunt has previously identified grief as hollow and emaciating, suggesting that it eats away inside the mourner, hollowing him out from inside just as Death does in Richard’s earlier conceit.

Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old.
 Within me grief hath kept a tedious fast,
 And who abstains from meat that is not gaunt?
 For sleeping England long time have I watch’d.
 Watching breeds leanness; leanness is all gaunt.
 The pleasure that some fathers feed upon
 Is my strict fast, I mean my children’s looks,
 And therein fasting hast thou made me gaunt.
 Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave,
 Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones. (2.1.74-83)

The physical effects of grief are to deprive him of sleep, making of him an ever-watching eye, and to make him fast, so that he is always hungry, always deprived and in want. Just as Richard later describes himself as “wasted” by time, Gaunt portrays himself as hollowed and emaciated by grief, his ageing and decaying body constructed around the grief which fasts within him. His sorrowing body

²² Ernest Kantorowicz was the first to pay sustained attention to this idea, in his 1957 study *The King’s Two Bodies*.

becomes at heart a void, “gaunt as the grave”. In the final, striking image, Gaunt’s feminised and hollowed body incorporates both womb and grave, superimposing them on top of one another. The womb within him is thus filled only with death: its contents of bones and emptiness are the foundations of the subject to which it will give birth; the new-born child of such a womb must carry within itself the signs of its own negation. (Lear’s process of self-discovery is not dissimilar, discovering as he does the mother within him, part of his road to the realisation that he is not all, not ague-proof.)

This sense of death-in-life has been previously applied to Gaunt himself by the Duchess of Gloucester in her attempts to persuade him to avenge his brother’s murder.

Ah, Gaunt, his blood was thine, that bed, that womb,
That mettle, that self mould, that fashion’d thee
Made him a man, and though thou liv’st and breath’st
Yet art thou slain in him. Thou dost consent
In some large measure to thy father’s death
In that thou see’st thy wretched brother die,
Who was the model of thy father’s life. (1.2.22-28)

The Duchess’s words invert the usual conceit in which a brother or father is said to live again in his sibling or child, to outlast his own death in another’s life. Instead, Gaunt becomes a figure of death-in-life, slain in his dead brother. The presence of the maternal womb within the subject becomes synonymous with the grave: it is the stamp or “mould” (a word which itself glances towards earth and decay) which connects Gaunt and Gloucester, the presence of death echoing within the still-living brother. In addition, her words suggest that the brothers are themselves only echoes, “models” of their father, and that Gaunt himself has become a parricide, responsible for the slaying of their family tree. As if in revenge, Gaunt himself will be starved to death by hunger for the sight of his exiled son. Rather than emphasising the potential for immortal life through family inheritance, for life in death, *Richard II* plays insistently on the theme of death in life, of the hollowness of the grave which lurks within every man, bequeathed from the womb.

The punning reference in the “hollow crown” speech to the king’s “mortal temples” also echoes and recalls another factor at play in the different “bodies”, juxtaposing the mortality of these fleshly temples of the head (the king’s body

natural) with the echo of religious temples. (A similar reference occurs after the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth*, when Macduff cries: "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope the Lord's anointed temple and stole thence/ The life o' th' building" (2.3.66-68)). Here, the conceit begins to draw out the king's function as vessel and meeting-point for two worlds: human and divine. This is a relationship which is fundamental to Benjamin's understanding of *Trauerspiel*, and especially for the role of the monarch within that dramatic form. Writing well before Kantorowicz, he does not explicitly discuss the sovereign in terms of the king's "two bodies", but the metaphysics of the sovereign's duality of nature are the same. Where *Tragödie* is myth-based and takes for its protagonist the tragic hero, he sees *Trauerspiel* as based fundamentally in historical life. Here, it is the sovereign who takes centre stage, as the representative of history itself. Benjamin finds in the monarch the figure of the one in whom the divine and human realms, terribly fractured in the Fall, have a chance to meet and touch, via the sovereign's role as divine representative on earth. The monarch inherits from his Christological "type" his duality: in him, something of Christ's divine and human natures are metaphysically present. Benjamin remarks that the baroque *Trauerspiel* inherits a great deal from the medieval Passion Play, becoming in part a secularised version in which the figure of the tyrant-monarch replaces the figure of Christ the King. *Richard II*'s dramaturgy echoes this: directly before the deposition scene, in which the new "subject" Richard emerges, is the scene in the garden in which the Queen laments her sense of imminent crisis. Emerging to confront the gardener who she overhears confirming her fears, she frames Richard's downfall in the language of Eden.

Thou, old Adam's likeness, set to dress this garden,
How dares thy harsh rude tongue sound this displeasing news?
What Eve, what serpent, hath suggested thee
To make a second fall of cursed man?
Why dost thou say King Richard is deposed?
Darest thou, thou little better thing than earth,
Divine his downfall? (3.4.72-79)

The monarch is always, to some degree, a figure in whom the divine and the human worlds, wrenched apart in the narrative of the Fall, are allowed to encounter one another. But it also bears within itself the tensions of such a duality between the divine and the creaturely impulses. Benjamin's finds in this

secularised baroque drama an “insuperable despair”, which he argues reflects the growing immanence of a post-Reformation world from which the divine presence seems increasingly remote. The crisis of the sovereign’s identity is an intimate and personal one, but it is also a representational crisis: as the divine realm increasingly withdraws itself and becomes remote, a gap opening up between the old religious rites and their significance, the sovereign’s role as mediator has become one of ever-increasingly importance. The terrible mournfulness that starts to emerge in these scenes reflects the play’s awareness of the way in which these two worlds are starting to become wrenched apart. The monarch may be a type of Christ, but it is his humanity, his creatureliness, that dominates.

This powerful sense of an increasing immanence, a new awareness of “creatureliness”, emerges in Richard as a new, intensely melancholy recognition of *sameness*, an emerging understanding of his kinship with other men.

Immediately after the lines on the “hollow crown”, he continues:

Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
 With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,
 Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
 For you have but mistook me all this while.
 I live with bread like you, feel want,
 Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,
 How can you say to me I am a king? (3.2.171-77)

Here is the “crisis of representation” that Benjamin sees as characteristic of the post-Reformation baroque, as a gap starts to open up between the proximity of “tradition, form and ceremonious duty” and the capacity for meaningfulness with which they have been previously invested. (The mournful *Hamlet* expresses a similar crisis as Greenblatt’s monograph observes and explores, with its intensely troubled focus upon “maimed rites” (of mourning, marriage, coronation, burial).) Here, it is the sovereign who becomes the locus for that representation, and Richard’s lines draw out the degree to which that consciousness of loss, of the emptying out of significance, takes place through and within the figure of the king himself. Once again there are echoes here of the same rage and above all the same disappointment of the sceptic as the fantasy of “allness” shatters: here, Richard discovers like Timon, Lear and Coriolanus the inexorable fact of his own status as a subject in need or in desire. The recognition of his kinship with other

men is also the recognition of his need to reach out after them: a king is self-sufficient and needs no friends, but Richard does need them. But it is in these last lines that Richard powerfully draws attention to the painful process being dramatised here. "Subjected thus,/ How can you say to me I am a king?"

Richard's mournful narrative starts here, as the loss of this myth of sovereign unity and intactness begins to be felt. As the whole and intact body of the king starts to unravel and disintegrate in its two component parts under the play's corrosive scepticism, what begins to emerge painfully from the space between these riven bodies of the "sovereign self" is nothing more or less than the political *subject*, a subject always and already in a state of mourning.

This mood of radical instability and the sense of a fragile identity easily dismantled is not, of course, exclusive to Shakespearean drama in Renaissance and early modern literature. Many critics, especially those of the new historicist movement, have remarked upon the sense of radical instability becoming prevalent in the literature of the Renaissance. Beginning his study with Henrician writers including Wyatt and More, Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* argues: "in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (2), suggesting that the self could increasingly be seen as something that could be moulded and re-formed. This he argues, is accompanied by a tendency towards "inwardness", an increasingly prevalent ideology of the self as something with a private, secret interior. Catherine Belsey agrees: in her study of early modern subjectivity and drama, *The Subject of Tragedy*, she argues that knowledge, especially of the self, has long been regarded as the pinnacle of attainment, but that the *nature* of this knowledge gradually shifts over time. In the Middle Ages, knowledge is of God and perfect knowledge implies a kind of mystical union with the divine, involving total absorption into the divine presence; paradoxically, the self can only achieve presence in the moment of its own dissolution, can attain the perfect knowledge which is life and truth itself. In this sense, the place of *difference* (here between the "subject" or self and the divine other who guarantees its being) becomes the place of death and absence.

Francis Barker's work also supports this theory: in his book *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection*, he argues that pre-"bourgeois"

subjectivity does not properly involve subjectivity at all, but a kind of dependent melancholy, an identity held in place by its relation with the other component parts of the body of the commonwealth. In this sense, it could be said that the pre-modern subject looks *outwards*, towards that which holds him or her securely in place and guarantees his or her identity: the public bodies or institutions of church and state; the total knowledge which is of God who creates and confirms. To a degree, then, the work of new historicist and cultural materialist critics like Greenblatt, Belsey and Barker has therefore tended to suggest that “inwardness” is characteristic of the modern subject, and is not fully available to early modern writers: the interiority which a play like *Hamlet* seems to suggest remains, so Barker suggests, largely “gestural”, although he also sees this a gesture at emptiness, the hollowness at the centre of this emerging modern subject. For him, the locus where this inauguration of the new subjectivity occurs is Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, in which the thinking self, rather than God and the external world, becomes the grounds of its own assurance. Splitting itself, the ego divides to become both subject and object of its own narrative. Barker locates the birth of the Freudian narrative here, in which the traumatic and in some instances tragic narrative of the riven internal subject is born.

More recently, however, the Burckhardtian overtones of such an assertion that the discourse of interiority is an exclusively modern phenomenon, unavailable to the “pre-modern” self, have seen them called into question. Two of the strongest challenges occur in David Aers’ essay “A Whisper in the Ear of the Early Modernists, or Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the History of the Subject”, and in Katharine Eisaman Maus’ *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. Aers demonstrates the degree to which representations of an imagined interior life within the literature of the Middle Ages have been under-estimated. Maus, meanwhile, successfully challenges the notion that early modern subjectivity was conceived of in exclusively outward and public terms, showing instead that the famous “inwardness” of *Hamlet* does not emerge from nowhere but rather from a much larger, even conventional, literary discourse concerning the self-consciousness produced by a division between inner conviction and outer display. And this in itself becomes part of another discourse again concerning the grounds on which self and other are available to one

another; the discourse familiar to us through lines of sceptical mistrust and fury such as “Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it”; “One may smile and smile be a villain” and countless others in addition. How, they demand, is one subject to know another, to have access to that external world, when the grounds of knowledge are slipping away, and when even the ability of the self to know itself is increasingly coming to look, not like sameness and unity, but like a place of *difference* and of separation?

This question becomes increasingly crucial for *Richard II*. The actual deposition scene only continues the deconstruction of Richard’s self which has already begun in his new and terrible awareness of his own vulnerability, his own mortality and hollowness. But in it he begins the forging of a new kind of selfhood based not around kingship but around mourning.

Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown,
On this side my hand and on that side thine.
Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another,
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen and full of water.
That bucket, down and full of tears, am I,
Drinking my griefs whilst you mount up on high. (4.1.181-88)

Recalling the sudden shock of hollowness in the death’s-head speech, and Richard’s earlier identification of his new ability to “taste grief” as something that makes him aware that he shares the same state as other men, these lines here identify grief as the basis of his new self, the substance which fills him, rushing in to fill the space that opens up between the two bodies as king and man are wrenched apart. They suggest that it is Bolingbroke whose selfhood is now founded upon emptiness, while Richard’s griefs make him “full of tears”, fuller than he has ever been before. Grief lends him a semblance of weightiness, of fullness, while Bolingbroke is left “dancing in the air”, the unstable and hollow king replacing Richard. Richard Halpern suggests that it in this scene that Shakespeare’s more “fiscal” version of *Trauerspiel* can most plainly be seen. He sees the two buckets as another articulation in the play of the king’s two bodies, reading them in Benjaminian terms as the creaturely body, subject to a gravitational pull back towards earth, and the metaphysical and weightless opposite, raised heavenwards as the other falls. In an earlier scene (3.2.) Richard

has fantasised that God is mustering armies of angels on his behalf, in defence of his representative on earth. Halpern remarks that Richard effectively invokes the power of the miracle, calling upon the divine presence with which he believes himself in communion. He reads in the central scenes the point at which the divine “beyond” withdraws and becomes unavailable.

Trauerspiel results not merely from the personal shortcomings of the tyrant but from the very structure of a cosmos in which the heavens have withdrawn behind a veil, leaving the characters of *Trauerspiel* to occupy a purely natural, creaturely world. ... The level of the state of creation, the terrain on which the *Trauerspiel* is enacted, also unmistakably exercises a determining influence on the sovereign. However highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of creatures, but he remains a creature. Or as the Duke of York puts it: “Comfort’s in heaven, and we are on the earth, / Where nothing lives but crosses, cares, and grief” (2.2.78–79). (72–73)

Cavell remarks of the ending of *Lear* that if it reflects in any way the redemptive story of Christ’s coming, it represents not the resurrection but rather the moment of crucifixion. Similarly, in this moment of *Richard II* the monarch’s tragedy is that he is fully inhabiting, not Christ the King, but rather the Christ who is fully human and who looks to heaven but receives no answer, no flight of angels: Christ the Man of Sorrows who cries out “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) but receives no answer.

While willing to resign his crown, Richard declines to resign his griefs, maintaining that he is still “king of those”. Grief takes over as the centre of a new identity, his old kingly identity systematically dismantled.

Bolingbroke. Are you contented to resign the crown?

Richard. Ay, no. No, ay; for I must nothing be.

Therefore, no ‘no’, for I resign to thee.

Now, mark me how I will undo myself. (4.1.200–03)

The scene counterbalances the initial sovereign “all” of the absolute monarch against the emergent “nothing” of these lines, at the moment of crisis in the deposition scene. In this sense, the scene foreshadows *Lear*. It is a moment that is fully sceptical, and fully tragic, as the two parts of the king’s nature are dragged apart leaving an “I” that is “nothing”. Like *Hamlet*, like *Lear*, and also like *Much Ado* and *The Winter’s Tale*, the play questions what such a “nothing” might look like. Hamlet’s division between being and non-being resonates here, giving way

to the frightening liminality of a state neither fully present nor fully absent. *Richard II* here reflects the same experience of sceptical uncertainty, the same one that Cavell describes as the question of “whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it” (3). All of what Cavell terms the *groundlessness* of scepticism is here, the vertigo of an identity suddenly and catastrophically in flux, adrift from the apparent security of its previous moorings, just as strongly as it is in *Hamlet* or in *Lear*. Richard’s lines pun on the sound of “no I”, no self, but other echoes might also be heard. An assertion, perhaps: “I know” cast immediately into doubt (“Know I?”). More resonantly still, a sceptical assertion: “I know no I”. And following this discovery indeed, a realisation: “for aye must nothing be.” Now that I know no I, no self, I must forever be haunted by the spectre of being *nothing*...for whatever “I” is, it does not cease with ceasing to be king, but merely enters some twilight and liminal state in which the sure and certain grounds of my being have been irrevocably swept away.

If this “nothing” is a pregnant nothing, it achieves a slightly different focus from the kind of monstrously fertile nothings of *Lear*, *Much Ado* and *The Winter’s Tale*. Here, the play focuses on what emerges from the riven and divided “sovereign self” of the king, as two constituent parts of his nature are wrenched apart. Coming into being is a particular “subject”, an “I” that is “nothing”; a self constituted out of absence, hollowness, the seat where the grinning antic Death keeps his court. A very similar depiction appears in Donne’s “A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy’s Day, being the shortest day”.

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new alchemy.
For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations, and lean emptiness
He ruined me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not. (10-18)

Like Richard II, Donne’s speaker finds himself re-born, an emerging subject constituted around the same “dull privations, and lean emptiness” that Gaunt’s “strict fast” has previously referred to, as we saw above (“Gaunt am I for the

grave, gaunt as a grave/ Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones"). Like Shakespeare, Donne conceives of a subject who is himself conceived in a state of hunger, of desire, and whose "quintessence of nothingness" is not a simple state of non-existence but a liminal, twilight state of "absence, darkness, death – things which are not". (The poem takes place at the dividing-line between night and day, old year and new, the moment of greatest liminality.) Crucially, this moment at which this negative and liminal subject emerges is one of profound and catastrophic loss. "But I am by her death—which word wrongs her—/ Of the first nothing the elixir grown" (28-29). The previous verse makes clear that their love has previously constituted them as two separate worlds, whose love made them all in all to one another. The withdrawal of his lover has given him re-birth, conceived out of this loss and constituted around its vacancy. This is a poem of mourning. Like the speaker of "S. Lucy's Day", Richard's new subject self emerges at the point at which he becomes conscious of this loss, coming into being as a mourner.

If the problematic addressed here is fundamentally the same as that of *Lear* and *Timon* – the problem of the withdrawal of some profoundly significant presence (call it the world; call it the divine "beyond"; call it the presence in and through which the subject's own meaningfulness is assured) then here, in *Richard II*, the play's response is cast in different terms. If *Timon* and *Lear* give us men stripped back to nothing, men whose falls from fortune bring with them an end to tragedy and language, then the genre of history responds very differently. Drawing out this idea of a subject self, painfully emerging, these plays present historical life itself as a state of mourning. Jan Kott responds to this with his tragic "mole of history" when he remarks that the mole's realisation that "earth, sky and stars" have abandoned him changes nothing about the mole's situation *but* its own awareness. It must go on digging, and being buried. This withdrawal of the mole's God is experienced as a great betrayal: Richard's eyes are not so blinded by tears but that he can see "a kind of traitors here" (recalling *Lear*'s shout of "murderers, traitors, all" (5.3.267)). Hamlet, too, feels it: "We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us", he tells Ophelia. And, gesturing towards the experience of an existence hopelessly caught between two worlds: "What should such fellows as we do, crawling between heaven and earth?" (3.1.128-30)

A comparable sense of a liminal existence stretching out after the withdrawal of the beyond also appears in *Macbeth*, another play that is a history play as well as a tragedy, although it is less usually considered as such. And placing it side by side with *Richard II*, it seems clear that *Macbeth* too draws upon the form of the *Trauerspiel*. Its witches and ghosts fill the play with “absence, darkness, death, things which are not”; the sleepless Macbeth and Lady Macbeth eventually join the ranks of these liminal creatures sleepwalking their way through the last scenes. Like Hamlet, Macbeth is confronted with a death that is out of time and out of joint: an impossible mourning. “She should have died hereafter” (5.5.17). He knows that he has outlived himself; outlived the time when his actions had significance, and the forms and ceremonies through which he used to relate to others still had meaning, as ways in which he and his friends could be present to one another. Now these ceremonies are “mouth-honour, breath” (5.3.27). He has lived long enough, to see his way of life wither on the tree.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow; a poor playe,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing. (5.5.19-28)

Here, in these lines, is a particular understanding of a way of life that might be called historical. The consciousness that ceremonies through which a relationship with a world stretching beyond the immanence of creatureliness have been emptied of significance, reducing them to the status of theatre, results in a life that has been lived “long enough”. Yet the endless tomorrows stretch mournfully on. Time is no longer measured by the span of a man's life; that life fills only the equivalent of an hour. Inasmuch as the history play might be understood as a kind of mourning-play, it dramatises a different kind of response to the sceptical problematic of the withdrawal of the “beyond”, and the availability of meaningfulness, of signifying something more than nothing. But it also casts historical life *as* mournfulness, allowing the form of the genre to play

out this mournful state of historical subjectivity. Exploring *Richard II* in relation to Benjamin's theory of the language, terms and ideology of *Trauerspiel*, Zenón Luis-Martínez remarks that Benjamin's understanding of the relationship between historical life and the form of the *Trauerspiel* captures the strong interrelatedness of poetic diction and historical ostentation for the expression of the early modern experience of historicity and temporality.

The kind of historical experience contained in the baroque *Trauerspiel* relies on a genuinely dramatic conception of historiography: rather than the catastrophic event itself, history is for the *Trauerspiel* that woeful web of experiences that captures the subject in his commerce with his own temporality. Against the chronicle's subservience to linearity and fact, and against the realistic tendency of the late sixteenth-century politic historians to represent historical progress in terms of causes determined by human action, the *Trauerspiel* represents history as a mournful experience. *Trauer* ensues as the effect of the dramatic discovery of a human condition that is essentially creaturely and time-bound. Accordingly, the *Trauerspiel* seldom stresses action; it is a drama of memory brought to expression, of characters grieving morosely for the scars left by the past upon the present, as well as on the uncertainties of the future. If memory provides the perspective from which the subject accounts for his flawed temporality, lamentation supplies its discursive and performative modes. (676)

Insofar as *Richard II* dramatises the emergence of the subject from the riven sovereign, it understands this state as one of historical life, and historical subjectivity; one in which the subject is born out of loss, coming into being always and already in mourning.

Perhaps this is the curse of Richard's own story: it is a 'tragic history' but a problematic tragedy. After the collapse of his omnipotent, kingly self, he seems unable successfully to mourn it, to progress. Time in Richard's world stands still and does not progress, while all around him Bolingbroke's chronological timing, his sequence of historical events, marches triumphantly on. Richard plays at kingship, plays at martyrdom, plays at poetics and theatricals, while Bolingbroke marches inexorably, efficiently towards his objective. In Richard's time there is no progression, no sequence, no development; while he stands still, disguising his static world with ostentatious speeches and theatrical gestures, Bolingbroke marches forward to the beat of historical time, as Richard himself comes to recognise.

Ha, ha, keep time! How sour sweet music is
 When time is broke and no proportion kept.
 So it is in the music of men's lives.
 And here have I the daintiness of ear
 To check time broke in a disorder'd string,
 But for the concord of my state and time
 Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
 I wasted time and now doth time waste me.
 For now hath time made me his numbering clock. (5.5.42-50)

The linearity of these lines, with their monosyllabic progression and monotonous repetition of "time", emphasise Richard's state of bondage, in thrall to the ticking of the clock of history. While Richard recognises his fatal error in squandering the time he had, the constraint and monotonous regularity of the lines echo his own bondage. The "disorder'd string" suggests not only the string of a musical instrument but also a knotted piece of string: unlike Bolingbroke's, Richard's time has never been linear but twisted and knotted, ever-moving yet static. Unlike the economical, calculating Bolingbroke, he has "wasted time", been too abundant in his use of it.

My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar
 Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,
 Whereto my finger like a dial's point
 Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.
 Now, sir, the sound that tells what hour it is
 Are clamorous groans that strike upon my heart,
 Which is the bell, So sighs and tears and groans
 Show minutes, times, and hours. (5.5.51-58)

The conceit of his body parts corresponding to different parts of the clock is painstakingly drawn-out, elaborately and laboriously extended: there is no elasticity of ideas, mimicking the monotony of his earlier monosyllabic lines on time. The fluid, elastic time which Richard has previously indulged in and 'wasted' has become the "jarring", insistent progress of Bolingbroke's triumph. The theatrical outpourings of Richard's melancholy have become regimented, bound in to the regularity of the great clock. Even his "clamorous groans" have become the bell of the clock, tolling with the sonorous monotony of a funeral bell. Richard's sense of the conflict between his time – the actor's time, the mourner's time – and Bolingbroke's chronological, historical time comes to a head in the next three lines. "But my time/ Runs posting on in Bolingbroke's proud joy/

While I stand fooling here, his Jack of the clock" (5.5.58-60). Like so many of his other personas, even Richard's unwilling role of clockface crumbles under scrutiny, as he fades into the semi-comic "Jack of the clock", the little figure striking the hours, and hence the servant left to mark Bolingbroke's time. Richard's bitter comment "While I stand fooling here" relegates himself to the stasis in which he has remained throughout most of the play: while his time "runs...on", leaving him behind, he is unable to do more than stand and watch it go. Richard's "fooling" also juxtaposes an increasing mental instability with the idea of acting, or playing. He is the melancholic actor, the "poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (*Macbeth* 5.5.24-25), only to emerge and discover that outside the private theatre time has moved inexorably on without him.

Luis-Martinez argues that the two clocks of history, Richard's and Bolingbroke's, belong to the opposing figures of the historiographer and the man of action. He develops the idea of two times, which exist on different axes.

This privilege [of historiography] unfolds an essential axiom in which Shakespeare's philosophy of history meets Benjamin's: the dialectical struggle of a time of action inexorably advancing according to rules of chronology – the realm of the chronicler and the politician – against a time of melancholic awareness – the mourner's time – whose historical progress is frozen into the fragments and ruins of words. (693)

The image of Richard left to "stand fooling here", immobile, while his time runs on without him, suggests that he is somehow paralysed and unable to move on, to progress. His time is perpetually "broke" and "disorder'd" not only because it is out of kilter with chronological time, but because it is static and unmoving; it has no inner sense of direction. His punning line, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me", suggests that he has squandered an abundance of time, and that time's vengeful destruction of him is twofold, both laying waste to him and wasting him away from inside. His earlier wasteful consumption of time has resulted in a hunger for more of it as it consumes him, emaciating him for the rapidly-approaching grave. He is being consumed from within, his selfhood endlessly consumed and endlessly mourned.

The melancholic's time may be frozen, but Richard's awareness of the relentlessly advancing clock is also, like *Macbeth's*, a coming-to-consciousness of

the fact that time is no longer measured by the span of men's lives; history's vastness, its indifference to its subjects, sees the span of a lifetime contract to a "bare hour" on history's stage. But if the play draws on history as *Trauer*, allowing the form of the history play to shape a different kind of response, it also problematises this kind of mournfulness. Richard's language in the deposition scene is the language of grief and failure, but it also makes implicit claims for the evolving subject and its performance of mourning, during the metaphor of the "two buckets". Bolingbroke's weightlessness, for all it allows him to rise heavenward, also constitutes him as an empty king. By contrast, Richard's grief lends him gravitas. As Luis-Martinez suggests, the play takes up the self-consciously performative dimension that has always characterised Richard's presence on-stage; the mode of performativity now becomes one of lamentation and mournfulness. But the difficulty is that Richard's mode of performance has always been one that has allowed him to "waste time", to displace his own time in a way that allows him a way of not being present to himself, or maintaining a distance between those two selves that becomes a disowning or displacing of an essential recognition. The language of mournfulness in which the new subject performs itself is largely inherited from just this mode of displacement.

Written during the same decade as Benjamin's *Ursprung*, one of the most significant modern theories of mourning that has emerged within the last century, and which has proved itself a foundational influence on various theories of cultural as well as individual mourning, appears in Freud's short essay on "Mourning and Melancholia". Freud's differentiation between the two related conditions provides one of the clearest articulations of the way in mourning relates to time, or rather to progression. For the purposes of the essay, Freud's interest in mourning is actually subsidiary to his interest in the related yet for him distinct condition of melancholia; his precise and clinical account of the functioning of the mourning process is provided primarily as a standard against which melancholia can be observed. "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). He suggests that mourning is the process by which a subject gradually relinquishes its libidinal attachment to a loved object which has been lost, with the great

expense of time and cathectic energy, before the work of mourning is completed and the ego becomes free and uninhibited again. This account identifies mourning as the psychological standard, or regular response to a profound loss, against which the “pathological” condition of melancholia is defined. Melancholia appears as a deviation from or perversion of this “regular” mourning. Like mourning, it is said to constitute a reaction to a loss, albeit a loss whose nature may be less obvious to both the melancholic and those observing him or her. Mourning and melancholia both constitute a response to losing something to which the libido was attached, and as such, many of their outward manifestations are identical. However, the melancholic displays one significant additional symptom.

The melancholic displays...an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. ... The analogy with mourning led us to conclude that he had suffered a loss in regard to an object; what he tells us points to a loss in regard to his ego. (246)

Freud suggests that the reason behind this important difference can be found in the nature of the melancholic’s attachment to his loved, lost object: his attachment has been effected by means of identification with the object. This explains why he experiences an impoverishment of his ego rather than his world: to lose the object with which he has so powerfully (identified part of his ego is therefore to lose part of his very self. He views the “regular” work of mourning very much in the context of a work or progress, something which echoes the emphasis that a play like *Hamlet* maintains upon the importance of the *act* or manifestation of mourning and rites. Freud identifies it as a lengthy, difficult and painful yet ultimately *finite* process of freeing the ego from the strength of its libidinal bonds to the lost object, a slow withdrawal. By contrast, melancholia attempts not to recognise the separation but to draw in the loved, lost object. Instead of gradually relinquishing it, the ego attempts to incorporate the object into itself, to devour it in a regression to the still narcissistic oral phase of the libido. Yet because this object is irretrievably lost, this produces a stalemate or impasse: able neither to successfully incorporate nor to relinquish the desired object, the ego waits in terror of losing itself, of witnessing its own cancellation.

Freud's essay gestures toward a sense that the mourner recognises in the object that he has lost something that gestures to a world beyond himself, where the melancholic's loss remains entirely at the level of self. The difficulty with this form of mournfulness lies in its attempt to force what is lost to make itself present. In *Richard II*, the king's loss results in a similar representation of endless mourning. Gillian Rose describes this state as a state of "aberrated", not inaugurated mourning: Richard's energies, and with them the energies of the play, become atrophied. In spite of his apparent outpourings of grief, Richard remains ultimately sterile and impotent, unable to grieve. Luis-Martinez's reading seems to suggest that Richard's is not the mourner's time but the melancholic's: it takes place outside chronological time because it is static; it does not progress to allow what is lost to depart and so to return.

This sense of melancholic historical time, the time of endless mourning, is developed in the play by the sheer volume of scenes of mourning and lament, arising out of subjects as diverse as the murder of Gloucester, the state of England, the Queen's nameless forebodings, the loss of the crown, and the parting of husband and wife. By the end of the play, Richard's state of mournfulness has become a state of endless, restless solipsism.

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king,
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king,
Then am I king'd again, and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be
Nor I nor any man that but man is
With nothing shall be pleas'd till he be eas'd
With being nothing. (5.5.31-41)

These lines, spoken by Richard near the end of the play after his deposition and imprisonment by Bolingbroke, express the kind of shifting, theatrical sense of subjectivity with which he is left after being "undone" and reduced to nothing. Again, it places Richard alongside the unstable and liminal Hamlet or Lear: like Hamlet, Richard longs for a nothingness of non-being, tortured by the unstable subjectivity constituted *around* nothing. Kings and beggars – and, by extension, all men in between – share a common flaw: they are all vulnerable, whether to

violence, treachery, want, hunger or cold. Neither monarchy nor beggary can shelter Richard or make him inviolable: to quote Macbeth again, “they are assailable” (3.2.39).

The previous fear of “I shall nothing be” gives way to a complementary, half-articulated longing for the release of truly losing his grasp on being, of being “eas’d/ With being nothing”. The nothingness which Richard craves promises an escape from the condition of being perpetually not “pleas’d”, an escape from unsatisfied desire: once again, it foreshadows Timon’s angry “nothing brings me all things”.

Richard’s solution is to refuse selfhood on the terms in which it is offered to him: by existing in a state of endless mourning, he creates himself endlessly, pouring himself out in floods of lamentation.

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world,
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself
I cannot do it. Yet I’ll hammer’t out.
My brain I’ll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts,
And these same thoughts people this little world
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented. (5.5.1-11)

In these lines the melancholy world Richard has created for and around himself becomes manifest. Imprisoned and utterly alone, cut off from the “populous” world, Richard is both mother and father to his world, still refusing the idea of otherness, of feeling the need or desire for another. Scott McMillin writes:

There is both agony and self-satisfaction in this kind of ‘breeding.’ The world created by this male-female poet trembles with instability. Nothing survives in its own identity: words contradict one another, thoughts die in their own pride, the ‘hammering out’ which the poet undertakes never produces a manifest form. It is a ‘still-breeding’ place, where ‘still’ means ‘always’ as well as ‘motionless’. Giving birth is both endless and static. Richard’s self-satisfaction comes from the very solipsism of this conceit. All that is born remains within himself. (47)

Richard’s world, produced by the endless act of contemplative mourning, creates a world in which he is father, mother and child. This world is endlessly

melancholic because endlessly hungry: “no thought is contented”, and the experience of frustrated desire, of mourning for the experience of being all, constitutes the world as a ceaseless restlessness, the act of continuous creation and continuous need. It recalls the frustrated desires of Timon; the rage at the condition of need expressed in *Timon*, *Lear* and *Coriolanus*. Richard’s solution, the sterile and fragile world continually brought forth, leaves him unable to enter that shared realm. Unable to mourn, he remains frozen in time: his time, the time of endless and solipsistic mourning, the time of the melancholy man.

However, if the play problematises the state of mournfulness then it also gestures towards a way in which mournfulness can allow truth to emerge.

Mine eyes are full of tears, I cannot see:
And yet salt water blinds them not so much
But they can see a sort of traitors here.
Nay, if I turn mine eyes upon myself,
I find myself a traitor with the rest. (4.1.244-48)

Sorrow allows Richard to see what Lear cannot; that he himself is a traitor “like the rest”. Reading perception in *Richard II*, Scott McMillin links these lines to an earlier scene, in which the Queen expresses her nameless forebodings in the language of lamentation, identifying her fears as “Some unborn sorrow, ripe in Fortune's womb,/

Is coming towards me, and my inward soul/ With nothing trembles”(2.2.10-12).

Observing that the Queen’s lines foreshadow Richard’s experience of finding “nothing” at the very heart of himself, McMillin observes:

[Richard] discovers, among the elements of selfhood, a vacancy or hollowness or absence – “nothing” is Shakespeare's word for it – which the Queen seems to have known about all along. In the business of theatrical representation, this is not a congenial discovery. “Nothing” does not project from a stage. It cannot be put on display. It seeks to be “unseen” – again the word is Shakespeare's. In other words, the Queen and Richard combine to form a motive which cannot materialize in the theatre and which cannot be seen there along the normal lines of vision. Much of the last half of Shakespeare's career can, I think, be understood as an attempt to establish an oblique vision in the theatre which would make the normally hidden a matter of perception, and *Richard II* is the play in which the problem first becomes distinct and explicit. ... When in his tears Richard learns that the traitor is within him as well as without, he passes beyond the external and theatrical seeing that the Bushys and the Northumberlands depend on and

attains an experience which for a woman can be thought of as childbirth and for men and women alike can be thought of as consubstantiality with another, even with the enemy. (42-45)

McMillin's reading gestures once again toward the way in which the theatre itself becomes a way of encountering "nothing". That encounter goes beyond the act of mere seeing (the "external and theatrical seeing that the Bushys and Northumberlands depend on") and becomes a form of "consubstantiality" (the word itself perhaps recalling something almost Eucharist in this fragile encounter of substances which itself can be thought of in terms of an encounter with a "beyond" that is divine). Benjamin's conception of the melancholy gaze gestures toward something similar. Referring particularly to Dürer's *Melancholia I*, Benjamin suggests that this tradition of melancholy contemplation responds to the crisis of representation.

Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning, which emerged unmistakably as a *pendant* to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man. (139)

This melancholy gaze, then, is fully and agonisingly conscious of the gap that has opened up between form and truth-content, but it seeks through this intense and searching contemplation of the form, although emptied of significance and now valueless in and of itself, faint traces of this divine truth-content that still remain. Unlike the solipsistic gaze of the final scenes, which looks only toward itself, this intense contemplation seeks something still to be revealed; a form with the representational power to gesture toward something outside itself. Furthermore, Benjamin suggests that *Trauerspiel* itself has this power.

The very name of [*Trauerspiel*] already indicates that its content awakens mourning in the spectator. But it does not by any means follow that this content could be any better expressed in the categories of empirical psychology than could the content of tragedy – it might far rather mean that these plays could serve better to describe mourning than could the condition of grief. For these are not so much plays which cause mourning, as plays through which mournfulness finds satisfaction: plays for the mournful. (118-19)

Richard Wolin remarks that for Benjamin, the world is ontologically prior to the subject; for him, therefore, knowledge is not simply a matter of empiricism but stretches beyond a given world of facts. The important thing to note here is the way that Benjamin sees *Trauerspiel* working: as an artistic form understandable only from the point of view of the onlooker, gesturing beyond itself to a realm of redemption. *Richard II* struggles to find a way of making nothing present, of making the subject present to itself and present to the others with whom it shares this fallen historical subjectivity. Again, it is in and through the theatre that this encounter becomes possible, but only because it gestures beyond itself. Here, theatre (like mournfulness) becomes the performative mode through which this encounter might be achieved.

Chapter 4: *Henry V*

Henry V has most usually been read as Shakespeare's quintessentially "English" play; a play that celebrates a foundational narrative of English nationalism and trumpets the triumphalist victory of Agincourt as a definitive moment in the "Tudor myth", at which the country emerges from the period of expiation from the deposition and murder of Richard II. Unlike *Richard II*, *Henry V* is a history play but emphatically *not* a tragedy. There is no tragic crisis, no agonising moments of sceptical terror; no cataclysmic descent into tragedy and nihilism. But, just as reading the tragic scepticism and mournfulness of *Richard II* within the generic frame of history play allows its preoccupation with the withdrawal of the divine to emerge as part of a narrative of specifically *historical* life, so considering the history play *Henry V* in the light of the *Trauerspiel* allows a different kind of mournful myth of origins to emerge. Shakespeare's understanding of melancholy history inflects and informs even the untragic histories, opening up spaces in which the origins of collective cultural identities in mournfulness for a fractured myth of a glorious and unified "golden age" are explored. Here, it is not in relation to the figure of the sovereign subject but the collective national identity. This chapter explores how considering *Henry V* as a play in dialogue with the genre of *Trauerspiel* – thus broadening the exploration of the relationship between *Trauerspiel* and the early modern history play – allows other potential readings to emerge. Returning to *Richard II* to begin exploring some of the ways in which nationalism emerges *as* mournfulness, the chapter looks at the way in which the performative mode of the collective national identity is one of mournful memory, drawing an audience together as historical mourners for a lost myth of origins. If nationalist origins are realised via the mode of memorial performance, they are also frequently shot through with hints of melancholy; in this way *Henry V*, too, is informed by *Trauerspiel*. The play draws out this sense of collective melancholy as cultural loss, drawing upon a related myth of national origins. However, what also emerges is a sense of melancholic avoidance: a form of cultural refusal to acknowledge what exactly has been lost.

Richard II is the Shakespearean history *par excellence* in which this sense of melancholic history emerges most strongly. Mournfulness is the performative

mode of this tragic play, and it is not confined to the mournful historical subject but allows a mournfulness that is nationalist in character also to appear.

Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old.
 Within me grief hath kept a tedious fast,
 And who abstains from meat that is not gaunt?
 For sleeping England long time have I watch'd.
 Watching breeds leanness; leanness is all gaunt.
 The pleasure that some fathers feed upon
 Is my strict fast, I mean my children's looks,
 And therein fasting hast thou made me gaunt.
 Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave,
 Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones. (2.1.74-83)

Gaunt's lines reflect a very personal grief for the loss of his son, but they also take up his earlier elegy for England in which the emerging distance between the original state of "This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,/ This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,/ This other Eden, demi-paradise" and its current fallen and degraded situation becomes a space in which *nationalist* mournfulness starts to emerge (2.1.31-68). An understanding of history as *Trauerspiel*, reflecting the loss of this "other Eden", allows Gaunt to inaugurate a sense of cultural mournfulness at the loss of a particular golden age which is then taken up by the increasingly nationalist language of the later histories. Gaunt's lines suggest that the mode in which nationalist spirit becomes expressed here is as a kind of crucially *mournful* memory. Those who remember what has been lost become the guardians of English cultural heritage, and their remembrance becomes a continual consciousness of the emerging distance between that golden age and the state of historical life as fallen and degraded. Rather as *Richard II* gestures towards an emerging vision of historical subjectivity based around the space of mournfulness, so does it also inculcate a related, but not identical, sense of the birth of national identity, forged out of the widening gap between the current state of England and the memory of what it used to be.

The history play itself starts to emerge as the locus in which this myth of historical origins is encountered; a living memorial, a bulwark against the careless forgetfulness (and self-forgetfulness) which Richard himself exemplifies in Gaunt's reproach. All history plays by their very nature stage an encounter between past and present, between the past historical events they represent and the present of the audience who watches them unfold. Shakespeare's English

history plays reflect upon, and call into question, emerging ideas of Tudor nationalism, for which this dramatic encounter between past, present, and indeed future, proves crucial. Exploring the necessary conditions for nationalism in the introduction to his book *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England*, Philip Schwyzer observes:

All historically based forms of nationalism rely to some extent on tropes – from Founding Fathers to Unknown Soldiers – to describe and ratify the connection between the living and the dead. ... British nationalism captures the sixteenth-century imagination not only because it serves the needs of the Tudor state and church after the Reformation, and not only because it was rich in the stuff of literary craftsmanship, but because it answered to a very deep and probably timeless desire: the desire to believe that the past can be recaptured, that what is forever lost may yet be found, that the dead may in some sense live again. (7-10)

In this sense, nationalism depends upon a national sense that a set of communal memories exist, stretching back into a shared cultural, geographical and historical past, and extending forwards into a shared future. Nationalism therefore relies upon social and cultural media to create such shared memories, chief among which is the theatre. In his 1592 satire *Pierce Pennilesse* Thomas Nashe remarked upon the English history play, “wherein our forefathers valiant acts (that haue line long buried in rustie brasse, and worme-eaten bookes) are reuiued, and they themselues raised from the Graue of Obliuion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence” (86-87). In other words, Nashe suggests that the early modern English history play has exactly the power to which Schwyzer refers, resurrecting the glorious dead by granting them fame and thus immortality, rescuing them from the obscure grave of national forgetfulness and re-inscribing them within the collective memory of the theatre-going public. For Nashe, literary history is not enough to prevent decay: there is something uniquely potent about the kind of resurrection and immortality provided by the staging of national history in the theatre. Brass monuments rust like the heroes’ armour; history books succumb to the ravages of worms like the

heroes' bodies. Only the theatre seems not to be subject to the kind of physical decay by which all other forms of memorial are threatened.²³

Just as Gaunt's lines cast nationalism in terms of the mournfulness of those who are left to remember, so history plays (as memorial devices) require the participation of a receptive audience to watch, remember and repeat them. When Richard II commands his friends, "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground,/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (3.2.155-56), he is requesting a rehearsal of a scene which he hopes to see enacted long after his own death, in which he himself can be performed and thus immortalised in the memories and lamentations of others. It is through the lamentations of others that he hopes to live on, immortalised as an icon of grief, a Man of Sorrows.

In winter's tedious nights, sit by the fire
With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales
Of woeful ages long ago betid.
And ere thou bid good night, to quite their griefs,
Tell thou the lamentable tale of me
And send the hearers weeping to their beds.
For why the senseless brands will sympathize
The heavy accent of thy moving tongue
And in compassion weep the fire out;
And some will mourn in ashes, some coal-black,
For the deposing of a rightful king. (5.1.40-50)

Richard fashions himself into a living martyr, looking beyond the comparatively unimportant event of his death to his immortalisation in living memory. Fittingly, Richard's final emblem will be neither a crown nor a sword but a coffin. In this speech, history is envisaged as lamentation, "tales/ Of woeful ages long ago" told by old people around a fireside to entertain themselves during a boring winter's evening. This is mourning as entertainment, like the lamentation for Hecuba which Hamlet's player speaks, causing not only his audience but himself to weep in the process. In fashioning his memorial in narrative, Richard prescribes his hearers' response, stage-managing a memorial performance by which he will be

²³ There is a parallel here with the kind of early modern anxieties surrounding memory's vulnerability to physical disorder and decay which are identified and discussed by Garrett A. Sullivan Jr., Evelyn Tribble and Lina Perkins Wilder. These anxieties reach a peak in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, in which awareness of memory's physical vulnerability forms a key part of the reasoning behind the mind-body dualism (see Timothy J. Reiss, "Denying the Body?" for a useful discussion of the role of memory here).

transmitted from hearer to weeping hearer, the decorum of their response measured by their degree of grief. As the brands weep, they will put out the fire which has served as the hub of this mini-theatre, effectively ensuring that the tale of Richard will be the finale of every fireside performance, the last thing each audience will hear before they retire. The “ashes” into which the weeping fire dies become the funeral ashes in which the listeners mourn.

Shakespeare’s histories explore this consciousness of the instability of historical subjectivity, threatened both by corporeal vulnerability and by national forgetfulness. The characters of the second tetralogy in particular indicate an increasing concern about how they will be remembered. Reflecting the commonly-held idea expressed by Nashe that fame can bring a legendary immortality, they express a painful anxiety that they should achieve some kind of stable historical identity by being honourably remembered after their deaths. In *Richard II*, this is given a particular urgency by the play’s pervasive mood of mournfulness, of the recollection of looming mortality. In line with this elegiac mood, this play is filled from beginning to end with references to mourning, weeping, grief and lamentation.

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings -
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poisoned by their wives: some sleeping killed -
All murdered. (3.2.155-60)

Richard’s conceit suggests that all the kings he recalls have been murdered by history, by their status as historical subjects. And for this reason, Richard’s command to his followers to “sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings” suggests an imperative need to overcome this, to establish dramatic immortality for his ancestors through a performance of mournful memory. The act of remembering English history has become a commemoration of the dead. *Richard II* foregrounds a specifically historical, melancholy subjectivity founded upon the experience of loss, absence and temporal instability. Remembering the past certainly shares a structural connection with mourning, as both evoke a gap or absence: anything worth remembering or celebrating must by its very nature have been lost. There will always be a gap

between what is being remembered and the remembrance of it. If a tragic or contemptible action is being remembered, the audience might find themselves saying with Lady Macbeth, "What's done cannot be undone" (5.1.64). If a great action such as Agincourt is recalled, then in the middle of the celebration of great men such as Henry V might occur the mournful echo of *Hamlet*: "I shall not look upon his like again" (1.2.188).

Considering history and tragedy in the light of each other, Benjamin's theory of early modern tragedy as *Trauerspiel* emphasises this mood of *cultural* mournfulness, which he identifies partly as inherent to historical tragedy itself, but locates specifically in the developing response of old religious dramatic forms as they respond to the Reformation as to a profound and irretrievable cultural loss. The world of *Trauerspiel* depicts a radically fallen form of tragedy, an historical, irredeemably violent world. In "Theses on the Origin of Philosophy of History", Benjamin writes:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257)

Looking at Benjamin's Angel of History in the context of his earlier thesis *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the angel looks very like the ideal audience of *Trauerspiel*, forever facing backwards to the stage where that "disconsolate chronicle of world-history" is being played out. Like Benjamin's Angel of History, the audience of *Trauerspiel* can only watch; they can neither alter the action nor recall the dead. Dermot Cavanagh points out that the historical action of the plays is often arrested and subjected to tragic reflection through acts of recollection and lament. He argues that this mode of understanding history derives partly from Shakespeare's indebtedness to the ethos and convention of *Trauerspiel*, which is a way of understanding history within theatrical works: the performative mode of history itself is closely linked to the performative mode of lamentation, through which Gaunt's lines suggest that nationalism itself keeps

alive a particular sense of the past, and of what has been lost. This mode reappears again and again, most obviously in the lamentations of the weeping women and children in *Richard III* or of Richard II and his queen. But it also surfaces in various elegiac speeches over the bodies of great men such as Talbot and lesser men such as Falstaff, or national elegies such as those spoken by Henry VI in the Towton scene of *3 Henry VI* or John of Gaunt in *Richard II*. The modes of history, theatre and mourning are interrelated: each conjures up the image of something great and famous, but it must remain irredeemably absent. It is in the context of this idea of an historical subjectivity or collective national identity based around the melancholy contemplation of historical spectacle that Shakespeare's history plays and the second tetralogy start to resonate, increasingly emerging as plays which reinforce this sense of history as mourning and loss, plays with a sense of a gap or absence at their heart.

However, if theatre becomes the mode through which nationalist spirit can be inculcated and passed on, it is also an inherently unstable and sceptical mode that frequently seems to threaten the very project that it seems designed to support. Shakespeare's English histories explore not just the historical events they stage but the way in which they are constructed as shared national memories and inscribed in the collective national consciousness. Exploring *Doctor Faustus* as well as a 1618 sermon of John Donne in his book *Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama*, Garrett Sullivan has shown how the act of remembering oneself, or one's roots, is often imagined as an assertion of subjective wholeness, the recollection of one's true self.

Judith Butler's influential discussion of gender as imitation can be usefully appropriated to describe spiritual self-remembering in different terms. Like gender, the remembered self is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself. (72)

Sullivan again draws upon this concept of self-remembering as self-construction in the following chapter on *Antony and Cleopatra*, when he argues that the play demonstrates a "sustained interest in the *constructedness* of the past" through its exploration of Antony's self-forgetting and self-recollection in relation to his Roman roots (88). Sullivan's arguments on memory, self-recollection, self-

forgetting and the past resonate not just in the context of Shakespearean representations of individual subjectivity, but also in the context of the history plays. Shakespeare's histories create a mnemonic referent for a shared myth of the past, for a collective national history. And as *Richard II* shows, this process is a highly manipulable one. Fittingly, Richard will be remembered by a mnemonic device, a coffin, which embodies his absence – an absence which will haunt Henry IV, and his son after him even on the field of Agincourt. The concern with how one will be remembered in history, and the metahistorical, metatheatrical focus of the history plays, is not confined to *Richard II* but pervades the whole tetralogy. Characters are often very concerned with how they will be represented. "Shame" and "honour" are two words which appear very frequently, often explicitly linked with future rather than current memories. "Live in thy shame, but die not thy shame with thee!" Gaunt tells Richard II (2.1.135), while in *Henry IV*, Hotspur fears a shame that will "fill up chronicles in time to come" (1.3.169). Later still, Henry V himself becomes preoccupied with the idea of being remembered for honourable deeds. Like Richard II, he hopes to overcome the instability of historical, temporal existence by fashioning a stable identity for himself in living memory. In the famous speech before the battle of Agincourt, he imagines the elderly war veteran of this battle in years to come.

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot
But he'll remember, with advantages
What feats he did that day.
...
This story shall the good man teach his son,
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by
From this day to the ending of the world
But we in it shall be remembered. (4.3.49-51; 56-59)

Lina Perkins Wilder points out that this speech

produces more than the nationalistic common memory...it also constructs theatrical memory and a remembering theatrical community. Hal's mnemonic succeeds, in one sense, because it takes shape before our eyes: as we the audience remember Agincourt, we also see it reconstructed by the mnemonic objects, the players, on the stage before us. (91)

In this sense it operates rather as the Mousetrap does for Hamlet: as a mnemonic device. It creates a visual memory of the event for those who were not present,

an “ocular proof” (*Othello* 3.3.363). That is to say, it is the staging of an event designed to *create* a memory or visual memorial reference point in its audience. However, this attempt ultimately draws attention to its own instability, its own hollowness. Examining *Henry V*, Philip Schwyzer points out that nostalgia is usually assumed to take for its object a “real thing”, some object or event that is believed to have real and solid existence, but that in *Henry V* this nostalgic memory of the past (in the shape of the glorious Edward III and his victory at Crécy) is already marked with the same tropes of haunting and playing which are used to characterise Henry’s own efforts to emulate his ancestor. “Even when they were living and breathing, they were already ghosts. ...The nostalgic desire to trace national history back to a definite moment of plenitude, before the sundering of word and thing, seems doomed to failure” (131-32).

Another way in which these attempts to create a stable national history or to assert the significance of one’s own honourable or shameful immortalisation become increasingly questionable throughout the tetralogy comes about due to the plays’ treatment of remembered and reported events. All of them are filled with references to past events, both momentous and insignificant. But one feature of the plays’ concern with remembered historical events is that no two memories are ever shown to be quite the same, because not only do people sometimes misrepresent the truth, they also experience and therefore remember events differently. This paradox emerges as we think further about how history is written and received. Stuart Hampton-Reeves observes:

An aspect of this paradox is the disconnection between ‘what happened’ and ‘what it felt like to be there’. The two are not the same. ...The real paradox of history, then, is that it needs the resources of narrative and theatre to give shape and emotional depth to ‘what happened’ even if, in doing so, those details are reworked. Sometimes history needs a good editor. (6)

The histories are absolutely full of disputes, great and small, concerning conflicting versions of events which are remembered and reported differently. For example, in *1 Henry IV*, Falstaff desires his company to be remembered as “Diana’s foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon” (1.2.25-26)? But might “thieves, rogues and vagabonds” be a more accurate phrase, as it would be to the wrathful Henry IV, or to those they have robbed? Is the youthful,

knowing Prince Hal corrupted by Falstaff, or is the old yet strangely innocent Falstaff corrupted by Prince Hal, as he claims? In *2 Henry IV*, a play filled with the reminiscences of decaying old men, is Justice Shallow right when he recounts happily to Falstaff how he used to be a great drinker and womaniser in his youth? Or is Falstaff right when he later says privately that according to *his* memory, Shallow was nothing of the sort?²⁴ These conflicting memories and histories are trivial in themselves, but not all the disputes over accuracy are so harmless. *Richard II* opens in the middle of a heated dispute between two powerful men, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, over whose version of recent historical events is the correct one. As the quarrel unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that not only are there political wheels within wheels here, but that there simply is no clear truth to be found. Bolingbroke may be right that Mowbray did withhold money that belonged to King Richard. But Mowbray may be right that the money really belonged to him because the king owed it to him anyway. A similar dispute arises in *1 Henry IV*, when Hotspur is accused of withholding prisoners of war: according to him, though, he only refused to hand them over in the heat of battle to a lord he despised. These disputes are not dissimilar to the small discrepancies between Falstaff and Hal's experiences, or between Shallow's and Falstaff's. But they play their part in plunging the country repeatedly into bloody civil wars. What increasingly emerges from this continual drip-drip of competing historical narratives and conflicting memories of events great and small is a sense of the subjective quality of memory. Whenever a tale is retold, the truth of it can never be grasped; the question "what really happened?" will never receive a single answer. At the heart of historical narrative itself is no centre, but only an infinite deferral or absence, a shifting series of subjective experiences. The distance opening up between those who look back to the past and the past itself is a cause for mournfulness, but it is also subject to an increasing scepticism about whether "the past" ever actually existed. And having said that, one of the unsettling features of history is that its current subjects never know where they are with it. On the one hand historical subjects are left to remember, to mourn for events and people past and never, so we might suppose, to come again. Yet at

²⁴ For more on this see Alison Thorne.

the same time they are left looking over their shoulders for its sudden reappearance. Emrys Jones points out that the documentation in the *Henry VI* plays of the dangerous possibility that two monarchs in one realm might lead to civil war would have held considerable and threatening resonance for a contemporary audience in the wake of the Babington Plot, while Elizabeth's legendary comment "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" also displays the fear that the past may not be dead, that it may come back to haunt the realm. The failure to remember the past is famously risky; it encourages past events to obtrude themselves on the present via unexpected acts of repetition.

In the light of this concern with historical representation, the intense metatheatricalism of the history plays is the less surprising. The theatrical medium both reflects the instability of history, memory and historical subjectivity, and participates in it. Metatheatrical references persist throughout the histories, emerging with particular insistence at their most self-consciously historiographical moments. Turning to *Henry V*, the Chorus can be found persistently mourning for the gap between the greatness of its subject matter and the inadequacy of the theatrical medium. At first this is presented in the form of a conventional apology for the deficiencies of the actors.

O pardon, since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work. (Prologue 15-18) ²⁵

However, this reference to the compensatory participation of the audience gathers force, with exhortations to "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts...For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings" (Prologue 23-28). For a history play, the sympathetic participation of the audience is crucial because they are participating in an act of remembrance: there will be always be a gap between what is being remembered and the remembrance of it, just as there will be between the theatrical representation of a thing – any thing – and the thing itself. The gap between the body of the actor playing Henry V and the

²⁵ Looking back to the first chapter, this image also reflects the tensions within nothing as nought or zero: the sense that the zero, which is capable of positive work (capable of signifying millions). in itself symbolising nothing or absence, lending to this apparently triumphal performative work of memory the shadow of emptiness and negation.

body of the historical Henry is really no greater than the gap between the historical Henry and his honourable, glorious reputation. Henry, or any other impossibly famous and glorified historical figure, must remain always merely a representation of himself, infinitely deferred, so that the body of the actor simply displaces him one more time in the series of mirrors.

A comparable moment occurs in the earlier history play *1 Henry VI*, to which Emrys Jones gives considerable attention in *The Origins of Shakespeare*. He scrutinises the (ahistorical and entirely invented) scene between the duplicitous Countess of Auvergne and Sir John Talbot in *1 Henry VI*, 2.3. For Jones, this scene is powerfully meta-theatrical, although its references are more veiled than those of *Henry V*: he argues that it comments obliquely upon the play's concern with the topical question of fame, "the posthumous life that great men and their achievements enjoy in the memory of others" (142), which reappears in *Antony and Cleopatra* as well as in *Henry V*. Jones points to the theatrical wordplay surrounding the scene ("his acts", "the plot", a reference to a "peaceful comic scene" as well as "shadow" and "shape" which can refer to an actor).

These theatrical terms point to the same idea: throughout the episode there runs an undercurrent of thought about imagination and reality – and what is imagined includes the life enjoyed in the minds of others by the famous, fame itself being as much a matter of imagination as the idea of drama, the imaginary events imitated by actors on a stage. The meeting between Talbot and the Countess brings out two sets of contrasts: first, between the fame of Talbot and the unimpressive physical appearance – the "shape" – of the man himself, at least as it appears to her; and second, between the fame of the historical Talbot in the minds of Shakespeare's audience and the "shape" it assumes, reincarnated by the actor, in the present play. (145-46)

Addressing the difficulty of the gap or "contrast" existing between these different bodies, the good actor-manager succeeds in transforming it into a virtue, the evidence of a glory that is literally *unimaginable*. Talbot, like Henry V, is always merely a representation of himself, permanently absent. His substance – what he is – can no more be made present by the Countess than by the theatrical director. Increasingly, then, the nationalist pride that the histories seem to aim at inculcating and supporting seems shot through with hints of mournfulness, which at certain points reflects simply the melancholia of loss, but increasingly

seems also threatened by a sense of scepticism about whether these myths of nationalist origin ever truly existed at all. If theatre is the mode in which they are best made present, then it also opens up a space for scepticism about whether what is being mourned ever transcends its status *as* theatre. History, like mourning itself, implies an act of remembrance – it celebrates or denigrates something that is lost, something which never even “occurred” except as part of a shifting plethora of subjective memories and experiences.

Benjamin’s understanding of baroque tragedy as *Trauerspiel* reads it as a form of the old religious drama, informed by an older understanding of postlapsarian historical life and its relationship with the divine. But he also finds in it a secularisation that is a form of despair, a response to the drawing-back of the divine. Reading baroque tragedy as a response to a profound cultural sense of loss, a traumatic shift in European civilisation, allows Benjamin to find in the baroque a cultural melancholia still relevant to his own time. His description of the landscape of baroque tragic art with its lowering skies resonates in a century in which theories of tragic art and tragic subjectivity are often shot through with a sense of immanence. The project of English nationalism emerges at certain points as a specific, polemical response to the split with Rome: an aggressive assertion of a stable and self-sufficient English national identity whose foundations remain defiantly stable. Drawing on Bale’s polemical *Kynge Johan*, and the anonymous *Troublesome Reign of King John*, Shakespeare’s early history *King John* provides one of the clearest examples here, as the English king robustly defies Cardinal Pandulph’s authority.

What earthy name to interrogatories
 Can task the free breath of a sacred king?
 Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name
 So slight, unworthy and ridiculous,
 To charge me to an answer, as the pope.
 Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England
 Add thus much more, that no Italian priest
 Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;
 But as we, under heaven, are supreme head,
 So under Him that great supremacy,
 Where we do reign, we will alone uphold,
 Without the assistance of a mortal hand:
 So tell the pope, all reverence set apart
 To him and his usurp'd authority. (3.1.147-60)

Elsewhere in the play John is a highly complex and ambiguous moral figure, but it is in this proud and spirited opposition to Rome that he comes closest to a Talbot, or more than anything to a Henry V. The histories respond in various places and at various times to a profound cultural loss cast in the language of a second loss of Eden (as for example in the words of the Queen in *Richard II*), and if they respond with mournfulness to the emptying out of the significance formerly attached to “maimed rites”, in which may be read in part a mournfulness that responds, as Benjamin and Greenblatt have earlier suggested, to the crisis of the Reformation. But they also seem intent on developing an alternative, secularised myth of origins founded not on the loss of the divine but on the loss of an English Golden Age in which the proud spirit of English nationalism had its birth. The narrative of mournfulness for the withdrawal of the divine beyond is very powerfully present in the fragmentary and ruinous tragic aesthetic of *Richard II* which mourns the gap opening up between the twin natures of the sovereign; the increasing unavailability of the divine timelessness. *Henry V*, by contrast, eschews such self-conscious mournfulness. Mourning in *Henry V* appears to be confined to the level of nationalistic nostalgia: the distance opening up between the audience and their origins in this lost Golden Age. But what increasingly emerges is a sense in which this self-conscious lamentation actually conceals and obfuscates what has truly been lost, much as Richard’s loud and melancholic lamentations frequently operate as a mode of denial (the “solipsistic” melancholia described by Scott McMillin) rather than the moments of more profound self-knowledge that they occasionally reach (as with the moment in which he acknowledges his kinship with other men).

Henry V is a play scored through and through with moments of profound scepticism about this glorious myth of origins. The road to “England, Harry and St. George” is paved with losses not officially recognised; with acts of political violence, manipulation and appropriation not acknowledged. The death of the much-beloved Falstaff, followed by the deaths of all Hal’s other disreputable yet joyous companions from the previous plays except Pistol, are barely acknowledged and certainly not by Hal, as the traces of his old way of life are swept away. Pistol himself, the sole survivor, becomes a mouthpiece for the play’s most searing scepticism: having failed in his frantic efforts to save the last

of the old companions, having been beaten and humiliated by his Welsh nemesis, he relapses into a grimly humorous cynicism as he inherits the opportunistic mantle of the dead Sir John.

Doth Fortune play the huswife with me now?
 News have I, that my Nell is dead i' the spital
 Of malady of France;
 And there my rendezvous is quite cut off.
 Old I do wax; and from my weary limbs
 Honour is cudgelled. Well, bawd I'll turn,
 And something lean to cutpurse of quick hand.
 To England will I steal, and there I'll steal:
 And patches will I get unto these cudgell'd scars,
 And swear I got them in the Gallia wars. (5.1.81-90)

As an exit, it could hardly be more effective in its brutal undermining of Henry's triumphal project. The glorious conquest of France has brought back more, it seems, than a French queen: like Pandarus, France has bequeathed England her diseases. Moreover, Pistol's parting shot comes after the "Crispin Crispian" speech: how, the audience might justifiably wonder, is one to distinguish in this brave national day of remembrance between those who got their wounds "on Crispin's day" and those who, like Pistol, have pickpocketed some of the glory? In addition, the earlier acts of violence on which this glory is predicated – the brutally swift political executions, the bloody wars, the mowing down of boys and killing of prisoners in revenge – contribute further to this scepticism, calling into question what is really being celebrated at all. The "band of brothers" speech, the claim that "he to-day that sheds his blood with me/ Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,/ This day shall gentle his condition" (4.3.61-63), rings hollow as he later distinguishes with care between the slain based on condition. *Henry V* draws upon Shakespeare's understanding of melancholy history, which has much in common with the form of *Trauerspiel*, but adapts it into a very different kind of historical mourning-play, a largely secularised version in which the collective national identity of those watching is formed out of the memory of a loss that is mnemonically constructed as they watch, made present by a performance of mourning. But such a cultural mournfulness starts in this context to seem deeply problematic in the light of the play's hints of scepticism concerning both the reliability of this memory and, more importantly, regarding the acts of collective national violence that must be occluded and avoided in order to sustain them. If

nationalism comes to seem dependent on an endless performance of mournfulness by the living, then, then this very mournfulness itself looks rather like a refusal to recognise who or what is being mourned.

Over the last century a preoccupation with the ethics of mournfulness, especially on a cultural level, has informed many of the most serious and productive theories of “modern mournfulness”, most of which find their roots somewhere in the discourse of mourning inaugurated in very different ways by Benjamin and by Freud.

Benjamin’s understanding of a *cultural* mournfulness in response to cultural crisis has proved influential for a several major twentieth-century theorists, some of whom have drawn upon narratives of mournfulness to assist in thinking about a more “modern” sense of cultural loss. His understanding of cultural melancholy is formulated partly in response to Nietzsche, in whose writings such a sense of immanence and loss emerges very starkly. In an essay on “The Death of God and Modern Melancholy”, Robert B. Pippin explores the critical reception of the famous passage from *The Gay Science* on “the crazy man”, in which Nietzsche articulates his now widely-quoted aphorism that “God is dead”. This, Pippin argues, can be considered as the *locus classicus* for the expression of a general constellation of themes, in which the problem of modernist negativity, dissatisfaction or despair begins to emerge. Pippin agrees that this passage can be understood to present the problem of a modern civilisation traumatised by the failure of a “form of life”, a trauma from which recovery or mourning is difficult, resulting in a “melancholic mood”. “He does not of course deny that some massive, traumatic event, the “great event” of modern times has occurred. Some possibility of going on as we had before has come to an end” (152). However, he takes issue with Heidegger’s charge of nihilism, arguing that Nietzsche is involved in an affirmative project, a project ultimately focusing on “cheerfulness” rather than guilt (albeit one that is ultimately couched in the language of failure). In his reading, Nietzsche’s passage is intended to be symptomatic rather than diagnostic of this modern culture of melancholy, identifying the shock of an “unbearable and frightening absence” experienced as a death, but posing as its main problem the question of coming to terms with such a loss rather than enacting the endless and repetitive melancholia, the weak

and passive nihilism of the “crazy man”. Nietzsche seeks a “non-melancholic” reaction to the death of God, “the possibility of a recovery of sorts from the trauma of modernity, the possibility of a new mythic sense of time” (154).

This view of a traumatic modernity, attempting to come to terms with its murder of an old order devoid of value, is a pervasive one. Glancing back to *Seductions of Fate*, discussed in the introduction to Part I, Gabriela Basterra argues there that our modern subjectivity is shaped around a tragic interpretation of events: for her, the modern self constitutes itself in subjection to coercive forces functioning like tragic destiny. This “tragic fate” – which goes by the alternative names of law, power, history, the state, God, the Name of the Father etc. – is embraced by the subject in order to make itself intelligible. To recognise and acknowledge the insubstantial and empty guilt of God (also known as the Past or Objective Necessity) would be to unleash chaos and undo the socio-symbolic order and with it himself, the tragic subject prevents such a collapse, prevents his own undoing, by taking upon himself the divine guilt and dying in the place of God. For Basterra, this is profoundly problematic because she believes that this “tragic guilt”, this internalisation of an *external* guilt, suspends the ethical responsibility one would otherwise have towards the other (“I am guilty for sacrificing the other; I do not wish it; I do it in full knowledge because the gods will it”.) The great counter-example provided is that of Oedipus, who is deprived of the opportunity to desire the (fictional) objective necessity and therefore becomes guilty through his actions but *not* through his desire. In this way Oedipus is not a tragic hero: refusing to acknowledge guilt and renouncing the tragic pattern in which he would redeem the order by a guilty death, he produces the unusual situation in *Oedipus Coloneus* of a tragedy whose protagonist refuses to die. Basterra argues that the driving force of tragedy lies in its enactment of the traumatic possibility of the collapse of the world, before it reaffirms the symbolic order which sustains the world when it seems in danger of fragmenting. The human subject assumes the traumatic injunction of desire placed upon it by objective necessity in order to avoid the necessity of confronting the monstrous nothingness of its other face; a “tragic” response, but not an *ethical* one, because it murders the ethical impulse to responsibility even as it saves the framework within which one’s subjectivity can be held. Basterra’s

take on the trauma of a specifically *modern* subjectivity argues that with the death of God comes the death of objective necessity: there is no longer a symbolic debt of guilt for to inherit, and thus the human subject can no longer be a subject fears watching its subjectivity unravel. What emerges in *Henry V* looks very like a state related to the one Bastera describes: a refusal to recognise the collective national responsibility for the acts of violence against the other on which they are predicated, made possible by a state of constant mourning for that mythical Golden Age in which they took place. Nationalism is in fact *constituted* around a state of loss, of being lacking. But of course, this original wholeness, this blissful *jouissance*, never existed. Returning briefly to Freud, we remember that his account of *mourning* implied a very real bereavement, a transparent and concrete loss, the object of which can gradually be detached from the affective bonds holding it in place. This invites a question: if the Golden Age eternally lost in this narrative of the origins of nationalism never really existed, then how can it be successfully mourned?

The idea of an ethical responsibility in mourning, an obligation to the other, emerges more insistently and urgently in various philosophical works on mourning written towards the end of the twentieth century. Derrida has written extensively on mourning, largely in the form of memorial lectures or essays on various twentieth century figures including Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser. Derrida focuses upon the work of mourning itself, returning some seventy or eighty years after the publication of Freud's seminal essay to the difficult and painful question of mourning and otherness: how best should I mourn the death of the other, to recognise that he is truly gone from me?

I speak of mourning as the attempt, always doomed to fail (thus a constitutive failure, precisely) to incorporate, interiorize, introject, subjectivize the other in me. Even before the death of the other, the inscription in me of his or her mortality constitutes me. I mourn therefore I am, I am – dead with the death of the other, my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning, a mourning that is moreover impossible. This is also what I call ex-appropriation, appropriation caught in double bind: I must and I must not take the other into myself; mourning is an unfaithful fidelity if it succeeds in interiorizing the other ideally in me, that is, in not respecting his or her infinite exteriority. (*Points...Interviews*, 321)

In this passage Derrida sets out his theory of an impossible mourning, a dialectical mourning both necessary and necessarily endless, a mourning which must avoid betraying the other by refusing to mourn him, by successfully mourning (and thus abandoning) him, or by slipping into the endless and cannibalistic narcissism of melancholia. Derridean mourning demands that one should – that one must – find a way of retaining the other without consuming him, of freeing the other without abandoning him, of remaining inconsolable yet not melancholic. The Derridean subject is the Derridean mourner: “I mourn therefore I am”. This idea arises in “Mnemosyne”, his lecture for Paul de Man: “This terrible solitude which is mine or ours at the death of the other is what constitutes that relationship to self which we call...‘subjectivity’ ” (33). For Derrida, “I am” only through the other, who can die; being-in-me is constituted out of the possibility of mourning; we come to ourselves through the memory of this possible mourning.

As we saw from “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud suggests that mourning is a work which must be completed, a fatiguing journey with an eventual end. He suggests that the subject is ultimately assisted in accomplishing this work by self-interest, because the alternative is to join the lost object in death. In her book *Mourning Becomes the Law*, the philosopher Gillian Rose argues that during the work of mourning one must let the other go, allow the other fully to depart and hence fully to be regained beyond sorrow. For her this is the legitimate decree of the law: mourning *becomes* the law. This law, she argues, decrees the necessity of relinquishing the dead, of returning from inner grief to the world of relationships, renewed and reinvigorated for participation. Mourning is an imperative, a command issued by the living community. Both Freud and Rose emphasise the crucial importance of successful mourning, of finding a way of gradually letting go of what has been irretrievably lost so that the mourner can return to the world of the living and relinquish the lost object to the world of the dead. The refusal to mourn is thus a refusal to obey the decree of the living community, a refusal by the bereaved subject to release his or her grasp upon the dead and allow them fully to depart from the compass of the mourner. Gillian Rose takes grave exception to what she regards as a threatening and ultimately specious, *unethical* form of mourning. *Mourning Becomes the Law*

forms an explicit challenge to and condemnation of this post-modernist mournfulness.

Post-modernism in its renunciation of reason, power and truth identifies itself as a process of endless mourning, lamenting the loss of securities which, on its own argument, were none such. Yet this everlasting melancholia accurately monitors the refusal to let go, which I express in the phrase describing post-modernism as “despairing rationalism without reason”. One recent ironic aphorism for this static condition between desire for presence and acceptance occurs in an interview by Derrida: “I mourn, therefore I am”. By contrast *Mourning Becomes the Law* affirms that the reassessment of reason, gradually rediscovering its own moveable boundaries as it explores the boundaries of the soul, the city and the sacred, can complete its mourning. (11-12)

For Rose, the intense work of mourning calls for, indeed decrees, a more complete release, in which one must let the other go, allow the other fully to depart and hence fully to be regained beyond sorrow: to acknowledge the justice and injustice of a partner’s life and death is to accept the law not to transgress it. “Mourning becomes the law” (36). Its condemnation of a subjectivity constituted around an act of endless mourning, of Maurice Blanchot for turning death and dying into an interminable act and mourning into *poesis*, suggests that the author finds something perverse in the post-modern act of performing a continuous creation of despair. This is death as a culture, death “endless in its extermination of life” (131), “death as utter abjection” (132).

As Shakespeare conceives of it, however, melancholy history recognises different modes and possibilities of mourning. If Richard II later slips into solipsistic melancholia, yet it is through a process of recognition, a sudden shock of loss, that he has earlier recognised his kinship with other men. Benjamin’s conception of *Trauerspiel* as plays for the mournful, plays through which the mournful can find satisfaction, looks back toward the power which he still finds in theatre to gesture *beyond* itself, to recognise fully and clearly what is that has been lost. In this sense, the history play also has a role to play in continually bringing to memory and to consciousness the very instability of the myths they mourn. This relationship between history, theatre and mourning brings to prominence the fact of timeliness; history is never present, always deferred, as is the subject of mourning itself. Shakespearean historical subjectivity is fashioned

in relation to a radical absence, which is reinforced in the audience's consciousness by the constant references to the theatrical medium and the gap between the representation and what is represented. As historical subjects they, together with the audience which participates in this unstable memory-theatre, remain subjects already and forever in mourning. The audience is compelled to sit upon the ground and remember the past, recognising what it is that has been lost, in order that the past may be continuously renewed and continuously purged, our relationship with our historical others mediated through our negotiation of relations with past and future, with history and remembrance. It is by this lamentable memory that we retain our connection with the past and its victims, creating a shared cultural history, a national living monument to the dead which nevertheless is doomed to remain forever inadequate and incomplete, always referential and representative. Here, the role of the history play as *Trauerspiel* seems intimately bound up with its ability to remind an audience of what is being mourned, bringing the audience into the presence of history victims as well as its victors. Only, it seems, by recognising the separateness of history, its darkness, can historical life become a process that looks beyond itself, to recognise what it is that is being mourned.

Part III: Tragicomedy

“The worst returns to laughter”. – *King Lear*

Marcus. Now is a time to storm. Why art thou still?

Titus. Ha, ha, ha!

Marcus. Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour.

Titus. Why? I have not another tear to shed. – *Titus Andronicus*

Introduction

Beyond Tragedy

If there is a fundamental question behind this thesis, and behind this chapter, it is this: how does Shakespeare ever manage to make the journey from tragedy to tragicomedy? By the mid-1600s he seems to have been at the height of his powers as a tragic dramatist. The plays being produced around this time include not only some of the greatest and most enduring tragedies – *Hamlet*; *Othello*; *Macbeth* – but also some of the most unrelentingly bleak and nihilistic: *King Lear*, and – with Thomas Middleton – *Timon of Athens*. To put it boldly, there is a sense in which these two push tragedy to its limits in the degree of absolute and earth-shattering catastrophe with which they confront us, the extremes of nihilism which they are willing to imagine: Timon, naked and cursing humankind in a hole in no-man’s-land; Lear and Edgar, capering naked and insane on the heath; Cordelia, dead in Lear’s arms. Both dramas end on a note of unrelenting bleakness: Timon goes to his grave an implacable misanthrope; *if* Cordelia lived it would be a chance which would redeem all sorrows; but she doesn’t, she’s dead as earth, and in the terrible finality of Lear’s words: “O thou’lt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never, never” (5.3.306-07). Tragedies like these raise questions about how there could possibly be a way back, or forwards, from such total disaster. And yet somewhere around this time Shakespeare apparently abandons tragedy, and turns his attentions somewhat abruptly toward tragicomedy and romance.

Where does tragedy find its end? The earlier play *Titus Andronicus* piles horror on horror until the tragedy becomes so overwrought that it reaches breaking-point. Surrounded by the mangled remains of his family, the sight of his own severed arm, Titus breaks out in wild laughter, drawing breath to explain: “Why? I have not another tear to shed” (3.1.267). In *King Lear*, Edgar seeks

comfort in the notion that there must *be* an end to tragedy. “The worst returns to laughter,” he muses in a comforting but short-lived delusion that nothing can touch him further (4.1.6). Sometimes laughter and the worst are indeed found in each other’s company: he, Lear and the Fool have capered together on the heath before now. This is an idea which Jan Kott brings out in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* with his pairing of *King Lear* with the tragicomedy *Endgame*: it is, after all, Beckett’s Nell who remarks: “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness” (Beckett 101). But this idea - that when one has not another tear to shed, the worst returns to laughter - has a curious parallel in Shakespeare’s own writings. If the mid-1600s bring Shakespeare to the outer edge of tragedy, his dramatic aesthetic subsequently turns more and more towards laughter – not the crazed hysteria of Titus or Lear, but the gentler laughter of the late plays, including *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and the play which provides the central focus for this chapter: *The Winter’s Tale*. Each of these plays stages a series of strange and often harrowing events, yet somehow manages to move beyond them to achieve some kind of reconciliation, toward conclusions which are in some generic sense *comic*.

The Winter’s Tale is usually read as a reworking of *Othello*, for obvious reasons: they both stage very similar stories of sexual jealousy. However, by reading it through the lens of scepticism – as a play that takes up and addresses the sceptical problematic discussed in Part I above – it is possible to read it as a play which addresses a fundamental problematic informing not only *Othello* but many more of the major tragedies, a problematic that reaches crisis point in the late tragedies and precipitates *Timon* and *Lear* over the edge into a nihilistic vision of total catastrophe. Part I aims to explore Shakespearean tragedy as a response to the pervasive early modern preoccupation with, and anxiety about, a world in which all available forms of knowledge and certainty are subject to intense doubt: the “culture of scepticism” in which, as *Macbeth*’s Duncan remarks sadly, “There’s no art/ To find the mind’s construction in the face” (1.4.11-12). Shakespearean tragedy takes up and scrutinises the problem of the available grounds of knowledge and finds them wanting: it considers and rejects them in a response of world-destroying nihilistic rage, leaving Timon howling for mankind’s destruction in his hole outside the city walls, and Lear stumbling on the heath, raving “Blow winds, and crack your cheeks!”. But as Cavell remarks,

what this vengeful and earth-shattering misanthropy reflects is a profound *disappointment*, and what Part I shows is that in *Timon* and *Lear* we find this disappointment arising from a raging desire. Available forms of knowledge of the other, body and mind, are rejected as inadequate; they leave the sceptic perpetually disappointed and frustrated by the other's otherness, the distance between sceptic and other. This desire for total knowledge being denied (which is total having, the demand for the other's *all*), tragedy stages a response which is tragic in its rejection of available grounds of knowledge, of having and holding. The tragic response is nihilistic in its total alienation of self from world: if the sceptic cannot have *all* of the world and the other, he will have *none* of it, and see it reduced to nothing.

Scepticism, both Cavell and Hamlin remark, has an intrinsic affinity for tragedy, but it is not limited to tragedy. When Shakespeare turns his attention to writing tragicomedy, the difficulty is still with him: both *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* take up and address the same sceptical problematic, this problem of other minds. *Cymbeline* presents us with two marriages: one in which faith is deceived, and the loving husband taken in by the outer "seeming" of his wicked queen; the other in which the husband is again deceived by a "seeming", but this time a sign which he supposes to show the "ocular proof" of his wife's adultery. *The Winter's Tale*, too, stages the problem of a marriage threatened by a sexually jealous husband, but it strips bare the workings of scepticism by removing from the equation the malign intriguer: *The Winter's Tale* has no Iago, no Iachimo, no such obvious cause for Leontes' suspicions. And what is particularly intriguing here is that the tragicomedies stage not only the same sceptical problematic regarding these available forms of knowledge – how is Posthumus to know that Imogen is chaste? how is Leontes to know whether or not Hermione is faithful to him, whether or not his children are really his own? – but also the same violent and nihilistic response. Posthumus' fury at Imogen's perceived betrayal is chilling: "O, that I had her here, to tear her limb-meal! / I will go there and do't, i'the court, before / Her father. I'll do something – " (2.4.147-49). If in their very incoherence Posthumus' menacing words echo Lear's impotent "terrors of the earth" threat, they also recall the earth-shattering rage of Lear on the heath. In the same position, Leontes proves more articulate. Here he is, his rage gathering

force as he watches Hermione whispering with Polixenes, his monstrous imaginings taking shape. "Is whispering nothing?" he asks.

Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh (a note infallible
Of breaking honesty)? horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? and all eyes
Blind with the pin and web, but theirs; theirs only,
That would unseen be wicked? is this nothing?
Why then the world, and all that's in't, is nothing,
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing. (1.2.282-94)

As the earlier discussion of Part I observes, one of the semantic echoes of "nothing" in Elizabethan English, no longer available in modern usage, refers to the female sexual organs. Here, Leontes' horrifying vision of the power of nothing to swell and grow into a world-annihilating *all* arises as he gazes at the sight of a female body, swollen from pregnancy. The play fixes its sceptical gaze here, directly upon this disturbing body, making it the target of its scepticism via the furious demand: how is a man to know that his children are really his own? What Leontes does here is to take, not quite a nothing, but the tiniest and most insignificant of somethings – a whisper, a glance, a smile, a tilt of the head – and to make a sceptical move. Because his scepticism tells him that he cannot be *sure*, that he can never be certain of reading it correctly, that his senses and his wife and his best friend *may* or may *not* have deceived him – he creates a monstrous fiction that swells and grows until it has the power to swallow up his whole world in a nihilistic vision of loss and dissolution as absolute and as violent and as bleak as any vision of nothingness offered by *Lear* or by *Timon*.

Scepticism in effect opens up a space for tragedy in this play: we see it coming in the vision of absolute destruction, a world swallowed up by nothingness, which Leontes envisages in his "Is whispering nothing?" speech. It is a vision which Shakespeare is fully capable of realising; *has*, in fact, realised in *Lear*, where absolute nothing does come of nothing. In *Lear*, the illusion of reconciliation, of redemption, is tantalisingly held out by the promise of the source play, itself a tragicomedy; by the return of Cordelia at the head of an

avenging army; by Edmund's urgent, last-minute confession ("Nay, send in time!"). If she lives, it is a chance which does redeem all sorrows. But she does not, and the gods do not defend her: nor are they just. And the very hope, however brief, of another ending is what makes the ending of *Lear* so finally, implacably tragic. If *Lear* is ultimately the more tragic for its momentary acknowledgement of other possibilities, what then happens in *The Winter's Tale*? How does tragicomedy as an aesthetic and dramatic form somehow allow Shakespeare to confront the same sceptical problematic, and more importantly the same initial *response*, which have given rise to tragedy in the past, and yet here to move beyond them?

Tragicomedy and the question of genre in Shakespeare's "late plays"

Discussing *The Winter's Tale* as a tragicomedy at all is a move that seems to call for some justification. The First Folio of 1623 classifies *The Winter's Tale* alongside the comedies, but it is a long time since anyone has routinely thought of it as such. The group of plays written in the period after the years in which Shakespeare produces so much of his greatest tragic writing, several of them collaborative efforts, have at various points been termed "tragicomedies", "romances" and "late plays". Every one of these ascriptions draws out different elements of the plays; makes us consider them within alternative frameworks, as Jennifer Richards and James Knowles point out in the introduction to their edited collection *Shakespeare's Late Plays: New Readings*.

Critics instinctively feel that there is something different about the late plays, though the nature of that difference...often proves difficult to locate and describe. ... We find, for example, that the plays have been variously designated romances, late comedies and tragicomedies, and that each term indicates a new way of looking at them. 'Romance' recalls the strangeness of the plays – their distant and far-away locations, their apparent attachment to chivalric values, their delight in riddles and expansive time scales, and, above all, their distinctiveness as a grouping. Alternatively, the term 'late comedy' proposes their kinship with Shakespeare's famous comedies of the 1590s, such as *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing* or *As You Like It*, or the Jacobean comedies and problem plays, such as *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*. In contrast again, the term 'tragicomedy' suggests Shakespeare's possible awareness of the dramatic experiments of Giovanni Battista Guarini, and reminds us too of his collaboration with John Fletcher, whose *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1609), identified in its preface 'To the Reader' as a 'pastoral tragi-comedy',

made its own distinctive contribution to English experiments in the genre. (6-7)

As Richards and Knowles remark here, there is a long critical tradition of differentiating Shakespeare's later writings (usually assumed to be the group of generically ambiguous plays dating from about 1607) from the period of his writing before that. This framework contravenes the project inaugurated by Heminges and Condell, the editors of the First Folio, whose attempt to persuade their readers to consider the plays within certain generic boundaries is unconfined by date or period.²⁶ Some of these plays, including *The Winter's Tale* and – most notably – *Cymbeline*, resist these generic classifications. Others – the collaborative works *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – were never included in the First Folio at all and therefore float more freely, away from such established generic moorings. Yet the myth that has grown up around these plays as a group is a problematic one, as recent scholarship has shown. Their heterogeneity resists easy assimilation into one single category, even as the presence of certain repetitive themes – myths of maternity; lost children, especially daughters; royal families and dynastic anxieties; strange and harrowing challenges solved by miraculous events and interventions – have given rise to numerous studies which put the plays into dialogue with each other in new and productive ways.²⁷

If Richards and Knowles are right that the term “late comedy” does indeed encourage us to consider the plays in the light of previous experiments in comic writing, they also emphasise that the adjectives “late”, “last” or “final” also have considerable influence upon our perception of this heterogeneous “group” of plays. Citing the criticism of Wilson Knight, Northrop Frye and S.L. Bethell, they suggest:

On these views, the progression of the Shakespeare canon – from comedy to tragedy to lyrical romance – reveals a playwright on a personal journey from immaturity to maturation and death, matched (allegorically) by a spiritual journey through struggle and conflict to reconciliation. Such emphases reflect the post-war mood

²⁶ Susan Snyder points out the apparently deliberate innovation of Heminges and Condell's decision. “What may strike us now as a conventional grouping was not so at the time: in the most obvious precedent for such a collection, the 1616 *Works* of Ben Jonson, the plays were arranged chronologically” (“The genres of Shakespeare's plays”. 83).

²⁷ See Knowles and Richards; Simon Palfrey; Russ McDonald.

but they also belong to a Romantic tradition of Shakespeare criticism which rejected the neoclassical tastes and naturalistic expectations of eighteenth-century critics such as Samuel Johnson. (3-4)

The temptation is to read in this “final” phase of writing a kind of Shakespeare-in-twilight, in reflective mood, to seek to find and decipher a form of “spiritual autobiography” (Richards and Knowles 4). This is an idea which has been taken up more recently by Gordon McMullan (himself a contributor to Richards and Knowles’ volume) in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*. McMullan’s study seeks to debunk the critical notion that to call the group of plays from *Pericles* to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* “the last plays” is to refer to them in neutral terms, thus avoiding the generic prescriptiveness of “romance” or “tragicomedy”. He argues that the notion of “late writing” develops under pressure from a particular critical narrative or ideology which seeks to read the “late plays” as late flowerings of authorial genius; the fruits of a mind coming to terms with its own maturity and the increasing proximity of death (the same “spiritual autobiography” referred to by Richards and Knowles). The study shows that such criticism relies implicitly on an anachronistic concept of “the Author” and his (always his) centrality, and verges on a dubious form of biographical criticism. McMullan argues that critics subscribing to this idea of “lateness” have tended to find in the post-1607 plays a serenity and mature conservatism (the same tradition that wishes to cast Shakespeare as Prospero, the Grand Old Man of the stage breaking his staff and gracefully retiring to Stratford, rather than continuing work as an active collaborator for several more years).

For McMullan, if any idea of “late writing” is relevant to Shakespeare then it is not the tradition of late writing as serenity and resignation but an alternative paradigm of “lateness”: the kind of “roughness” and furious energy that Edward Said locates in the late work of Beethoven and Yeats. Supporting his arguments with extended reference to Russ McDonald’s recent book *Shakespeare’s Late Style* (written alongside his own work), McMullan argues that the late plays are characterised in both style and ideas by a restless, subversive energy and a “jaggedness”. This sense of them is already evident in an earlier project of McMullan’s, *The Politics of Tragicomedy* (co-edited with Jonathan Hope and published some fifteen years previously), in which he considers the late plays as

tragicomedies; there he argues that they are not expressions of a serene political conservatism, and that tragicomedy itself is not – as has sometimes been supposed – an inherently royalist genre. Drawing on such readings, Hope and McMullan effectively aim to do for tragicomedy what Jonathan Dollimore did for tragedy with *Radical Tragedy*, challenging a critical orthodoxy maintaining a particular genre's intrinsic political conservatism and thus opening up spaces for alternative readings. "This unease with the utopian endings tragicomedy can provide requires our recognition of its radical ambivalence and open-endedness as a genre" (Hope and McMullan 14).

The problem with Hope and McMullan's account here is that, in its eagerness to destabilise critical readings which emphasise the plays' "serenity" (and which in doing so fail to recognise their alternative energies and unanswered questions), it verges on a bipolar reading of tragicomic endings. *Either* tragicomedy is "utopian", sweeping all problematic elements under the carpet, *or* it remains entirely open-ended, full of a raging unease, restlessly raising questions with no attempt to confront or to mediate them. But to regard the reconciliations that tragicomedy stages as simplistically "utopian" is severely to underestimate the nature of tragicomedy, of what it is capable of as a genre. Considering the plays as tragicomedies, within the aesthetic and dramatic framework of tragicomedy, allows us to study their different energies and possibilities in generic terms. Tragicomedy, I want to suggest, is precisely that genre which is best designed to allow an unprecedented encounter between the truly *tragic* and the truly *comic*, to acknowledge, stage and negotiate the difficult and uneasy meeting of disparate and heterogeneous anxieties and generic possibilities in the form of laughter and shudders, without sweeping either aside. By considering *The Winter's Tale* as a tragicomedy, I want to suggest that it allows a sustained and serious recognition and mediation of the tragic with a fullness that comedy does not permit. Furthermore, I also want to suggest that the very nature of tragicomedy is to accommodate "roughnesses", retaining a sense of open-endedness without closing them down, in endings which move from the possibility or even the reality of total catastrophe to mark a difficult and painful reconciliation, remaining generically *comic* without ever becoming "utopian".

Early modern tragicomedy in theory and practice

What, then, *is* tragicomedy? The term encourages us to consider a play within a completely separate framework from that of “romance”, for example. In contrast to a romance, “tragicomedy” implies a dramatic stage play, and draws out the internal relation of the generic elements. W.B. Yeats famously remarks of Shakespeare that he “is always a writer of tragi-comedy” (175), and he is entirely right, in the sense that Shakespearean drama so often refuses to close off alternative generic possibilities, finding comedy amidst horror, or acknowledging undertones of anxiety and cruelty in comedy. But Yeats is really using the term “tragi-comedy” in a descriptive, modal sense here, to indicate this kind of fruitful hybridity. He is not using it in a strictly generic sense, to suggest that Shakespeare’s plays always literally belong to the *genre* of tragicomedy. By considering *The Winter’s Tale* as a tragicomedy, I wish to draw out its peculiar relationship with tragedy, to work out something about how it manages to address the *tragic* and then to move beyond it in a way allowing for a different generic outcome.

“Tragicomedy” is an exceptionally slippery genre in various ways. It was effectively “born” on the early modern stage, in the sense that this was where it first began to be treated both in theory and in practice as a genre in its own right (and not always with approval). But both the term and the practice of tragicomedy are much older still. The term “tragicomoedia” originally appears in Plautus’s play *Amphitryon* in the 2nd century B.C., when the god Mercury addresses the audience in the prologue. What, he says jokingly, don’t you want the play prepared for you? Shall I change it?

I will set out the plot of this tragedy. What? Did you pull a face, because I said it was going to be a tragedy? I am a God, so I’ll change it, if you want. I shall make a comedy out of this tragedy, with all the same verses. Is that what you want or not? But that’s a bit silly of me – as if I didn’t know what you want, being a God. I know what’s on your minds. I’ll make it mixed: a tragicomedy! I don’t think it would be appropriate to make it a consistent comedy, when there are kings and gods in it. What do you think? Since a

slave also has a part in the play, I'll make it a tragicomedy, like I just said.²⁸

From its earliest beginnings, then, the idea of “tragicomedy” begins to raise important questions regarding the precise relationship of the tragic and the comic; the question of how, exactly, tragedy can *turn* to comedy. What does Mercury mean when he says that he can create comedy out of tragedy while still using all the same verses? That it is simply a matter of changing the ending? This does not work for Greek tragedy: the *Eumenides* or the *Oedipus Coloneus* are still definitively tragedies, despite the reconciliations on which they finish. So it might also cause us to ask about the relationship between ending and journey, about how we get to that ending. All is not necessarily well that ends well: the Greeks knew it, and Shakespeare undoubtedly knows it too. And as with any commercial theatre, the conditions of performance also have their part to play: the fusion of tragedy and comedy may also reflect the need to cater for audience tastes, being something of a compromise between the desires of writers and the conditions under which their writing reached the stage. Just as a play like *Timon* appears to reflect the fruitful tensions between two very different writers, so other productive forms of collaboration may be said to exist, including a form of collaboration between dramatist and audience.

One venerable tradition which pre-dates the Renaissance by some considerable way and which might also be considered as modally tragicomic – although not part of the genre of tragicomedy itself – is that of medieval religious drama. These mystery and miracle plays sometimes come very close to tragedy with the extremes of suffering that they not only acknowledge but dwell upon – the torture of Christ, the murder of Abel, the ruin of Job or the sufferings of the martyrs – yet they are not tragedies, because of the way in which they also look beyond the immediate sufferings of Christ and His people to a promised future in which these sufferings will be translated to eternal bliss and salvation. The promise that such sufferings will achieve a retrospective meaning and a purpose retains these plays within a *comic* framework – comic in the same way that

²⁸ These lines are taken from the Prologue of Plautus' *Amphitryon*. I have used Subha Mukherji and Raphael Lyne's translation of these lines, which appears on p. 9 of the introduction to *Early Modern Tragicomedy* (ed. Mukherji and Lyne).

Dante's *Divina Commedia* is comic – yet they are tragicomic in the sense that the suffering is real, is immediate, is as yet only under the *promise* of future translation, and that it does not currently quite make sense. The tension here is between two very different frames of understanding: one being that of the divinity whose full knowledge arises from its omniscience, its ability to see the beginning and the end because, being outside time, the end is already here; and the other a temporally-bound human understanding, uncomfortably partial and incomplete. There is something about the extremes of misery which escape the promised end, are in excess of it. Most is well that ends well, we might say, but not *all*. There is something left, some loose ends remaining; if the plays are not exactly sceptical, they at least retain some unspoken, and unanswered, questions. The Passion itself would be a tragedy if the victim were not God, if Good Friday did not look ahead to Easter Sunday; as it is, the suffering itself may well be presented as tragic, even though the plays themselves look beyond tragedy to the promise of the resurrection.

The term “tragicomedy” starts to crop up again more persistently during the Renaissance, often with very mixed feelings on the part of the writer. Sidney, writing his *Defence of Poesy* which was first published in 1595, famously makes a series of remarkably disparaging remarks about it.

It is to be noted that some poesies have coupled together two or three kinds, as the tragical and comical, whereupon is risen the tragic-comical. ... But besides these grosse absurdities, howe all their Playes bee neither right Tragedies, nor right Comedies, mingling Kinges and Clownes, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the Clowne by head and shoulders to play a part in majesticall matters, with neither decencie nor discretion: so as neither the admiration and Commiseration, nor the right sportfulnesse is by their mongrell Tragicomedy obtained. ...If we marke them well, wee shall finde that they never or verie daintily, matche horn Pipes and Funeralls. So falleth it out, that having indeed no right Comedie in that Comicall part of our Tragidie, wee have nothing but scurrillitie unwoorthie of anie chaste eares, or some extreame shewe of doltishnesse, indeede fit to lift up a loude laughter and nothing else: where the whole tract of a Comedie should be full of delight, as the Tragedie should bee still maintained, in a well-raised admiration. (39-40)

As a working definition of tragicomedy as a genre, these remarks fall very far short of the mark.²⁹ However, it is not altogether clear in this instance that Sidney is actually talking about tragicomedy at all: the idea of thrusting in clowns at indecorous moments resonates more with tragedy than with comedy – as for example with the Fool in *Lear*, the clowns in *Faustus*, or the subplot of *The Changeling*, set in a madhouse. It should be noted that, as John T. Shawcross points out, the term “tragicomedy” suggests that tragedy is modal, while comedy is generic (13). Thus, while tragicomedy is not a sub-genre of comedy but a genre in its own right, its aesthetic form nonetheless bears a closer relationship to comedy than to tragedy. What Sidney draws to our attention are the highly fruitful and productive generic *conversations* taking place all across the Renaissance stage. He is not, as it happens, criticising tragicomedy per se but only bad tragicomedy. Nor is he necessarily opposed to the mingling of laughter and tears, disliking it only when it appears crude or indecorous, and disapproving only when he deems its effect on the audience morally inadequate, being neither didactic nor delightful.³⁰ This stage background is of enormous importance when considering Shakespearean tragicomedy, because it helps to remind us that Shakespeare was writing very much from within a whole tradition of innovative generic fluidity. Writers were increasingly beginning to experiment with the explicit mingling of tragic and comic material, some of which emerged as the natural consequence of fusing rhetorical and dramatic styles from very different dramatic traditions together. Richard Edwards’ *Damon and Pythias*, written in 1564 and first published in 1571, is a very early example of this kind of writing. In her editions of Edwards’ works, Ros King suggests:

Damon and Pythias may be the one surviving example of a strand of English drama which can be thought of as a missing link between Shakespeare and the English medieval tradition. It syncretises elements from four different types of drama: the

²⁹ This mismatch between early modern literary theory and dramatic practice is something which, as both McMullan and Hope and Mukerji and Lyne are anxious to remind us, is characteristic of the period. Indeed, McMullan and Hope suggest that critical over-reliance on the theory of the period is partly responsible for the reductive, prescriptive and ultimately very conservative view of tragicomedy as a genre which has limited it as a focus for critical discussion. Nevertheless, it would be a grave error of judgement to brush aside as irrelevant the remarks of contemporary theorists and commentators simply because they fail adequately to account for plays which we now regard as part of the tragicomic canon.

³⁰ For further discussion of this point, see Greg Walker.

classical new comedy of Plautus and Terence; the English vernacular morality plays; the tradition of courtly disguising; and the dialectical dialogues of classical philosophy in which different characters argue partial or conflicting aspects of a philosophical problem. It displays a surprising facility with wordplay but, in the absence of other evidence, its most important innovation is perhaps the introduction of the truly multiple plot into English drama. ... Plays with multiple plot lines generally have the effect of raising questions about meaning rather than imposing interpretation. This modality of representation – in which one idea is presented in different contexts and with different degrees of seriousness – is matched by a corresponding playfulness in language (different tongues and registers, a variety of metre, multiple simultaneous meanings) and also by a range of theatrical styles, from high camp tragedy to low farcical comedy. (*Edwards* 87-88)

In addition to this kind of fusion of tragedy and comedy, other forms of conversation between tragedy and comedy existed, often emerging from out of the conditions of performance. I have already mentioned tragedies with comic subplots, but other examples might include Marston's decision to write a comedy, *Antonio and Mellida*, which ends in the promise of marriage and reconciliation, only to follow it with a gorily tragic sequel, *Antonio's Revenge*. Original staging conditions might also have made a considerable difference: one convention of the Renaissance stage, still maintained by the "Shakespeare's Globe" theatre today, concluded every production, comic or tragic, with the infamous, bawdy Elizabethan jig.³¹ We might even speculate that comic potential might be found in the performance of tragedy by children. Educated audiences would, of course, have been well-accustomed to seeing and hearing classical speeches and drama performed by children since their grammar school days, and the children would have been perfectly capable of performing tragedy with perfect seriousness. But dramatists must also have been highly conscious of the possibilities made available of different kinds of playing companies, and the different effects that might be created by adult versus childish performance, just as puppet theatres can perform "straight" tragedy, or suddenly make the audience conscious of an ironic gap between the narrative and the medium. This seems especially likely for certain of the more melodramatic tragedies, such as *Antonio's Revenge* itself;

³¹ For a full account of the jig, see Charles Read Baskervill.

the contrast between the overblown and highly adult sentiments of love and revenge being spoken, and the childish mouths speaking them, creating a comically sceptical (or tragicomic?) discrepancy.

One of the earliest, and most influential, writers to consider tragicomedy squarely as a genre in its own right was the Italian dramatist and literary theorist Giovanni Battista Guarini. His play *Il Pastor Fido* was written between about 1580 and 1584; attempts were made to stage the play in 1584, although the first definite performance of the play dates from 1586 (Sampson). The play circulated in manuscript form for some years before its publication in December 1589; it proved enormously popular, despite (or perhaps because of) the controversy surrounding it, and went through multiple editions. (By the time of Guarini's authorised edition of 1602 the play was in its nineteenth edition.) Influenced by the newly-popular tradition of Italian pastoral drama, the play is innovatively termed by its author a "pastoral tragicomedy". The play experienced a difficult reception and came under considerable critical fire from the Italian literary critics and genre theorists of the day, whose ideas of generic decorum were heavily influenced by Aristotelian theory, and remained highly sceptical of the propriety, usefulness and indeed the dramaturgical success of such an experiment in the mingling of tragic and comic forms. (Some of their arguments, indeed, seem to echo Sidney's disparagement of tragicomedy as the clumsy juxtaposition of "hornpipes and funerals").³² In response, Guarini mounted a spirited defence of tragicomedy. His initial two replies, *Il Verrato* (1588) and *Il Verato* (sic) *Secondo* (1593) were eventually amalgamated and heavily revised to become the *Il Compendio della poesia tragicomoedia*, which was first published in 1601 and then re-published as an attachment to the 1602 authorised edition of *Il Pastor Fido*. Guarini's defence rests on a refutation of the kind of Aristotelianism practised by his critics, an insistence that their understanding of Aristotle is based on a fundamental misreading of the *Poetics* and its significance as well as a misunderstanding of the nature of tragicomedy itself. One of the major arguments to emerge from his defence is that tragicomedy does not simply represent the yoking together of tragedy and comedy, but the creation out of this

³² For a fuller account of the emergence of pastoral tragicomedy and its critics see Matthew Treherne.

mingling of a new genre, perfect in itself (Guarini's less-than-grandiose comparisons include the birth of a mule from the pairing of horse and ass, and the creation of bronze from copper and tin). Crucially, he insists with vigour that tragicomedy is no bastard hybrid but a new species in its own right.

Guarini's ideas were influential, not just upon his own countrymen but beyond. Whether or not Shakespeare himself knew Guarini's drama or his criticism remains impossible to say.³³ However John Fletcher, with whom Shakespeare collaborated on at least two occasions and who went on to become one of the most successful writers of tragicomedy on the early modern English stage, certainly did. Fletcher produced a tragicomedy entitled *The Faithful Shepherdess*, first performed in 1608, which draws heavily on Guarini both generically and tonally. It met with a disastrous reception, leading both Francis Beaumont and Ben Jonson to leap to Fletcher's defence in print (Lyne 99). Fletcher himself mounted his own printed defence in a preface to the play (published c. 1609): "To the Reader".

A tragie-comedie is not so called in respect of mirth and killing but in respect it wants deaths, which is inough to make it no tragedie, yet brings some neere it, which is inough to make it no comedie: which must be a representation of familiar people, with such kind of trouble as no life be questioned, so that a God is as lawfull in this as in a tragedie, and mean people as in a comedie. (497)

Fletcher's words echo Guarini's *Compendio*, which he has clearly read: Guarini writes that tragicomedy stages "the danger but not the death" of tragedy. That tragicomedy necessarily "wants deaths" is clearly untrue: *The Winter's Tale* alone tells us so much. But if we were to replace "deaths" with "total disaster", then Fletcher might be closer to the mark. As the earlier part of the argument discusses in relation to *The Winter's Tale*, above, part of tragicomedy's impact depends upon its ability seriously to confront the possibility of tragedy and to make it real before finding a comic resolution. This is one of the considerations that links experiments in tragicomedy as disparate as Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King*. By contrast, a play like *Much Ado About Nothing*, while it toys with the potential

³³ The first known translations of *Il Pastor Fido* into English and Latin appeared in 1602. See Lyne, "English Guarini: Recognition and Reception". The play is mentioned by Lady Politic Would-be in Jonson's *Volpone* of 1605 (3.4.86).

for tragedy, never makes it a real possibility: the audience are never under any illusion that Hero has died, whereas all three of the tragicomedies just mentioned keep the audience in ignorance of the revelations that help to achieve comic resolutions (that Mirtillo is Montano's son; that Hermione is alive; that Arbaces is not Panthea's brother).

Guarini's defence of tragicomedy is mounted with extended reference to Aristotle. In keeping with this he pays particular attention to the role of the emotions in the audience, emphasising tragicomedy's peculiar version of catharsis. Where tragedy is thought to purge *eleos* and *phobos*, Guarini argues, tragicomedy also performs its own purgation, not of pity and terror but of melancholy.

But to conclude once for all that which it was my first intention to show, I say that to a question on the end of tragicomedy I shall answer that it is to imitate with the resources of the stage an action that is feigned and in which are mingled all the tragic and comic parts that can coexist in verisimilitude and decorum, properly arranged in a single dramatic form, with the end of purging with pleasure the sadness of the hearers. This is done in such a way that the imitation, which is the end, is that which is mixed, and represents a mingling of both tragic and comic events. But the purging, which is the architectonic end, exists only as a single principle, which unites two qualities in one purpose, that of freeing the hearers from melancholy. (*Compendium* 524)

Exactly how this purging is to be achieved remains tantalisingly unclear, just as the passage on catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics* remains one of the most obscure and hotly-contested even today (that this was already true in Guarini's own time is clear from some remarks of his earlier in the *Compendium*). But Guarini's theory grows out of his understanding of Aristotle, and he certainly understands Aristotle to be suggesting the purgation of a particular emotion *via* the experience of that same emotion ("Thus terror purges terror", *Compendium* 517). It seems highly likely, then, that Guarini understands tragicomedy to purge melancholy via the stimulation of, and engagement with, melancholy itself as well as "pleasure". Like every other contemporary definition of tragicomedy, it would be a mistake to imagine that Guarini's represents a full or satisfactory definition of the genre. But this emphasis on the place of *melancholy*, and its purging, resonates with the preoccupation that many of the tragicomic plays

display with mournfulness, its resolution, and the negotiation of loss. If thinking of the late plays within a sceptical framework (as I have previously suggested) allows us to consider them as taking up the problems addressed by earlier tragedies, then considering them as plays which address melancholia and mournfulness might allow us to consider them as also taking up some conception of the tragic as *mournfulness* that is left over from the history plays (as discussed in Part II, within the generic framework of *Trauerspiel*). In the context of *The Winter's Tale*, the main focus of this chapter, this concern with a mood of mournfulness, and a process which might in some sense be seen as a work of mourning, rests in the triple loss suffered by Leontes, and his response to them.

Chapter 5: Late comedy: *Much Ado About Nothing*; *Twelfth Night*; *All's Well That Ends Well*

So far, Part III has aimed to suggest that Shakespeare's writing of tragicomedy offers a reworking of the sceptical and nihilistic problematic addressed across the tragedies written during the first few years of the seventeenth century. It has also attempted to sketch some of the broader generic contexts in which his writing of tragicomedy emerges and develops, and to suggest that Guarini's conception of tragicomedy as a working-through of melancholy might enable us to consider its engagement with the tragic partly in terms of mournfulness, something which recalls the conception of history's interrelation with tragedy developed in Part II via Benjamin and *Trauerspiel*. What, then, of the place of *comedy*? Even though we no longer think of *The Winter's Tale* and its fellows in generically *comic* terms, we might wish to ask what else has occurred in the background on the path of tragicomedy. What has happened to comedy, and why is it no longer sufficient? As Lawrence Rhu expresses it: "By the time of *Twelfth Night* [Shakespeare] has exhausted comedy and the conviction that marriage can signify a happy ending all around, though he keeps trying for a couple of plays and years. He has just written *Hamlet*, and *Othello* is well under way, a way that leads soon enough to *King Lear*." As *Much Ado* and *Twelfth Night* exhaust the possibility of marriage as a panacea, they give way to *Measure for Measure* and especially to the provocatively-titled *All's Well That Ends Well*, which like *The Winter's Tale* begins where *Much Ado* and *Twelfth Night* have left off: in a marriage, but a marriage in crisis. Before turning to *The Winter's Tale* and exploring it as a tragicomedy, then, I want first to look briefly at three of the late comedies, suggesting some of the ways in which they too pave the path to tragicomedy.

Much Ado About Nothing

Just as in *King Lear*, *Richard II* and *The Winter's Tale*, *Much Ado About Nothing* features a recurring preoccupation and engagement with the idea of "nothing". In the other three plays, "nothing" comes into play during moments at which the dramatic action is arrested and becomes the focus of an intense and tragic scrutiny: *King Lear's* bleak "nothing will come of nothing"; *Richard II's* fearfully unstable "I will nothing be"; *The Winter's Tale's* nihilistic "Why then, this

world is nothing...". These moments share something with *Hamlet's* "To be or not to be" and *Macbeth's* "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow": moments of reflection at which *nothing* is invested with significance that is primarily tragic. But in *Much Ado*, which shares this preoccupation with the trope, nothing becomes part of a different generic framework. Once again, nothing becomes the focus of a sceptical scrutiny of the problem of other minds, but this time the anxieties it generates, while related and comparable to those found in the other plays, are yet held within – and form part of – the boundaries of *comedy*.

Much Ado About Nothing explores, within the frame of romantic comedy, sceptical anxieties about love, marriage and the competing claims of romantic love and male friendship. *Much Ado's* comedy of love, and its conflicts (the "merry war" into which Benedick and Beatrice fling themselves with anxious gusto, and the conflicts, less merry and more troubling, into which Claudio and Hero find themselves embroiled) take place against the background of an altogether different kind of conflict: the unexplained "wars" from which Don Pedro and his men are returning victorious. Benedick and Claudio have been brothers-in-arms, but this military combat is now ended, and the returning soldiers are invited to lay down the work of war in favour of the work of wooing (work appropriate to comedy). In a currently unpublished paper, part of a larger forthcoming project on comedy and war, Susan Harlan suggests that war, and the memory of war, becomes one of the play's "nothings".

The war in this play is a masculine void, an absence that is analogous to the play's central anxiety concerning feminine nothings. But, unlike feminine nothings, this war-nothing generates no anxiety. I am interested in what it *does* generate: an isolated recollection and a masculine, militant cognitive space – or nothing – that this recollection occupies. ... This play has a memory of war that stands in opposition to the characters' tendencies to forget, or quarantine, military violence. In other words, by coding the war as a nothing, the play makes it something. (1-2)

Harlan's interest is in the way in which the memory of war exists in dialogue with the genre of comedy, which requires the men to lay down their military identities and take up "a civic identity more appropriate to comedy" (6). This is something which Claudio, and Don Pedro (albeit only by proxy) appear only too

eager and willing to do. At the beginning of the play, only two major figures remains sceptical: Benedick, and the bastard Don John.

If the play stages a conflict between the alternative claims of romantic love on the one hand and masculine – and martial – fraternity on the other, then it also stages two alternative responses to these claims. Benedick has early expressed an anxiety over the competition between the two, but also over the dichotomised response enacted by Claudio.

I have known when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife, and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe. I have known when he would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour, and now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier, and now is turned orthography – his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes. May I be so converted and see with these eyes? I cannot tell; I think not. (2.3.12-21)

Susan Harlan argues that Benedick's resistance to this shift

places him dangerously outside of the mandates of comedy, a problem that must be rectified. Like Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, whose own memorial practice of mourning her brother takes her out of romantic circulation, Benedick stands, at the beginning of the play, outside of romantic narratives, and he must be forcibly re-integrated into the play's comedic trajectory. (7)

She is right, of course: the only other major character to express scepticism and displeasure about the invitation to turn from the mandates of conflict to those of comedy is the malevolent intriguer Don John. Like Iago, and even more like Richard III, Don John is the stock figure of the intriguer, out to trouble the serenity of the scene from a restless sense that he is ill made-up for comedy, that his proper milieu remains within the recently-ended arena of war and conflict. Benedick's scepticism places him in the uneasy position between two foils: on the one hand Claudio, eager to abandon his military identity in favour of the identity of the romantic lover, and Don John on the other, remaining steadfastly outside and in opposition to the boundaries of comedy. Although Benedick lacks any shadow of Don John's malignity, he too finds himself profoundly and anxiously out of place in the generic arena of romantic comedy: suspicious of love, marriage, and disturbed at their power to work such an

abrupt conversion in Claudio, as well as at the idea that he too might find himself seeing with “these eyes”.

Just before this diatribe, Claudio has provided Benedick with all the ammunition he needs to remain sceptical about the evidence provided by these eyes anyway: what a man sees is heavily conditional upon what he is predisposed to see, and the line between the loving and the infatuated gaze is a thin one.

Claudio. In mine eye, she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.

Benedick. I can see yet without spectacles, and I see no such matter.

...

Claudio. When you went onward on this ended action,
I look'd upon her with a soldier's eye,
That lik'd, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love:
But now I am return'd, and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying I lik'd her ere I went to wars. (1.1.174-85)

Benedick's mistrust of love's power to convert the gaze is thus part of a much broader sceptical engagement which the play performs concerning love, eyesight and the “problem of other minds” with which we are now familiar. Benedick's anxiety about love and its effects has been earlier expressed when, protesting vociferously against the charge that he will ever consent to become “Benedick the married man”, he spits: “That I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none” (1.1.223-27). These lines convey in comic terms a sceptical anxiety about the demands of romantic love and marriage, and their dangers: physical intercourse is here imagined as the hanging up of the masculine “bugle” into the crucially unseen space of the feminine “baldrick”. They form part of a much wider anxiety in the play concerning the negotiation of, and placing of faith in, the unseen. Imaginatively, this placing of faith in a place that is hidden and unseen, imagined as a female place, is linked to the risk of adultery and betrayal (the horn-call that is to be “winded” in Benedick's forehead). The problem of other minds becomes integrated, within the generic frame of romantic comedy, with the anxieties

generated by the claims of romantic love over male friendship, so that the female “nothing” becomes the focus upon which this sceptical gaze is directed. The comic fear of adultery, prefiguring the preoccupation of *The Winter’s Tale*, is a configuration of the problem of the available grounds of knowledge of the other, body and mind. And as in *The Winter’s Tale*, what is at stake in the possibility of betrayal by that other is the imagined horror of masculine shame and exposure: the humiliation of wearing on one’s forehead an advertisement which everyone but the wearer can see, and which leaves exposed some kind of truth *about* that wearer (like the whispers which Leontes imagines to leave him revealed). How, the play asks, is the sceptic to trust in a *knowledge* of the other when that knowledge is based either on ocular proof (always partial and untrustworthy) or on love’s understanding, where love stands accused of being subjective, arbitrary, changeable, and capable of altering to the visual gaze to make its evidence all the less trustworthy?

The play continues this concern with the central charade (prefigured by Claudio’s jealous misinterpretation during the masked ball), in which (as discussed in Part I) the difficulty of negotiating a “nothing” which seems to invite a violently penetrative sceptical drive is imagined as theatre. Leontes’ “Is whispering nothing” speech takes up this problematic and stages it, illuminating the full nihilistic, tragic potential of such a move. *Much Ado’s* acknowledgement of the darker potential of its material is well-documented: Alfred Harbage, in 1947, summed up these feelings of disquiet when he referred to Claudio as “the least amiable lover in Shakespeare” (192). Returning to Susan Harlan’s reading of war and martial identity as the occluded memory on which the play constructs its conflicts, it seems possible to read Claudio’s violent reaction to Hero’s perceived betrayal as a return of the disclaimed martial masculinity. By contrast, Benedick’s choice to remain beside Beatrice, Hero and the other women, when all the other men but the priest – Hero’s own father included – have abandoned them can be read as the moment at which he lays aside the priority given to the claims of martial brotherhood in favour of the claims of romantic love, even before pledging his sword arm to their service in the infamous moment of choice with which Beatrice bluntly presents him: “Kill Claudio!” (4.1.288).

The play thus juxtaposes two contrasting pairs of lovers: an immensely *successful* couple – the wonderful Beatrice and Benedick – alongside a disastrous pair (Hero and Claudio). Although it stages an engagement with “nothing” which allows it to anticipate the much darker “nothings” of the tragedies that follow, “nothing” here remains still within the boundaries of comedy, the anxieties it generates about the problem of the other (here figured as the sexualised and hidden female body) remain largely laughable, as they are in Benedick’s tirade about bugles and baldricks. The play never tips over into tragicomedy, largely because the audience are never kept in ignorance of the true state of affairs, either the nature of Don John’s charade or the false “death” of Hero. Claudio is reintegrated within the boundaries of romantic comedy by a kind of enforced “mourning” for Hero, at the end of which he agrees – albeit somewhat reluctantly – to undergo a marriage with a type of “unseen Hero”, Hero’s veiled “cousin”. *Much Ado*’s encounter with the sceptical problematic *averts* the possibility of tragedy rather than fully recognising it as *The Winter’s Tale* will do later, but it nevertheless makes central to the comic ending an acceptance of an encounter with the *unseen*. It does this both in Claudio’s still only half-satisfactory regeneration and in the much more satisfactory union of Beatrice and her lover, the arch-sceptic Benedick, whose martial identity is integrated rather than occluded into his comic identity as a merry warrior, and whose scepticism does not, in the end, preclude his instinctive acceptance of the grounds of available knowledge, on which he becomes at last “Benedick the married man”.

Twelfth Night

If *Much Ado* finds its comic action taking place against the background of military violence and the memory of war, so *Twelfth Night* finds romantic comedy amidst a setting imbued with an uneasy consciousness of death, disease and decay, of mourning and of melancholia. The play is as much a comedy *about* mourning as of anything else, a play about the competing claims of the living and the dead. As Susan Harlan remarks, Olivia begins the play outside the boundaries of comedy, a figure who must be re-integrated into the comic social order, allowing the claims of the living and the loving to draw her back from her deep mourning. Mourning is the defence Olivia employs against her overly-persistent suitor, invoking the claims of the dead against the unwelcome demands of the

living. And Viola, that other sister in mourning for a brother lost, does something rather similar in using her brother's supposed death as protection against a predatory masculine world, dressing in clothes like his to enter the comically problematic environment of Orsino's court. The play may take steps to re-integrate Olivia from her mourning into the world of romantic comedy, but what we might think of as the work of Viola's mourning – the loss of brother and her response to it; her embodiment and performance of Sebastian with all its bewilderingly comic consequences – is also the *source* of that comedy, which seeks to mediate between love and death, between their alternative claims.

Romantic love is *sick* in this play; sick, as Olivia tells Malvolio, of "self-love". Orsino's first appearance, his striking of rhetorical poses like some overblown and fretful caricature of a Petrarchan lover, confirms this.

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting
The appetite may sicken and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall.
... Enough, no more.
Tis not so sweet now as it was before. (1.1.1-8)

The comparison of romantic love to appetite is commonplace, but this is a diseased appetite; its gluttony is *bulimic*, first gorging only in order to purge itself. It relishes the semantic nexus of love and death drawn out in that resonant word *die*, an appetite that sates itself in gorging. And the connection between love, death and disordered eating continues, as Orsino employs a Petrarchan metaphor of hopeless love – the pursuit of a deer – only to find it turning to resonant classical allegory.

O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first
Methought she purged the air of pestilence;
That instant was I turned into a hart,
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
E'er since pursue me. (1.1.18-22)

At first Orsino pursues love, rather like the speaker of Sir Thomas Wyatt's famous Petrarchan translation "Whoso list to hunt". But his metaphor undergoes a rapid shift. Now it echoes the story of Actaeon and Diana, so that the beloved object which the hounds of Orsino's own desire pursue – and upon which they savagely fall – is, in fact, Orsino himself. And enveloped in the folds of *this*

particular version of the Actaeon legend is another myth again: the myth of Narcissus, consumed by desire for himself.³⁴ If Orsino's earlier love-appetite seemed bulimic, it has now become anorexic, feeding on itself from within and thus consumed by its own ravenous appetite.³⁵

Romantic love lives under the shadow either of sickness or of violence in this comedy: it is there in the ague-ridden Sir Andrew, haunted by Sir Toby's linguistic hints of syphilis; in Antonio, whose intense and masochistic love for Sebastian, so far in excess of the linguistic boundaries of *philia*, assumes that love is obsession and manifests itself in a willingness to undergo torture or imprisonment in the service of the beloved; in the violence with which Orsino threatens Viola-Cesario during the final dénouement. But, more than anything, this play and its conception of romantic love, so uneasy and so anxious, is dominated by the Narcissus-myth. It is there in Orsino, gorging himself on a self-consuming desire; it is there in Malvolio, "sick of self-love". It is even there in the illusion lying behind Olivia's desire for Viola (for what might she not see in the disguised Cesario but herself: a young woman, and one also in mourning for a brother lost?). And above all it is there in Viola herself, hollowed-out like a diseased and worm-eaten rosebud by the all-consuming melancholia of silent love as she sits like Patience on her monument; hollowed out by worms like John of Gaunt and Richard II; all the while consuming and enacting the brother who is as like to her, it seems, as any non-identical twin could possibly be. It is worth remembering that in one version of the Narcissus-myth Narcissus had a twin sister, and that the myth reflects, quite literally, something about the difficulty of differentiating between self and other.³⁶

In her cross-dressing, Viola enacts a performance of mourning. Her brother lost, she takes him into herself for a time, consuming him and making him of herself, purposely dressing to resemble him and apparently speaking and acting so like him that onlookers will later be amazed. If love and death in this play are linked, as they repeatedly are – by Orsino, by Antonio, by the words of

³⁴ Narcissus wasted away from starvation because he could not bear to leave the reflection in the pool. In this sense he inaugurates a myth, not only of *narcissism*, but of anorexia too.

³⁵ We might also recall Volumnia's notorious lines: "Anger's my meat. I sup upon myself/ And so do starve with feeding" (see Chapter 1, p. 109).

³⁶ For a full study of the connections between early modern melancholy, narcissism, subjectivity and sexual difference, and literary form, see Lynn Enterline.

Feste's songs – then mourning too works out a complicated relation between loving and leaving, between the claims of the dead and the claims of life, of comedy and of romantic love (Illyria versus Elysium). And Sebastian is still *inside* Viola-Cesario when he returns from the dead, leading to that strange and anxious comic dénouement, the call to Cesario to relinquish Sebastian and return to Viola. It strikes her dumb, twice. The first time occurs when she is mistaken for Sebastian by Antonio and loses her ability to speak: it is here that she reveals her clothing to be purposely modelled on his. And it happens again in that long-drawn-out dénouement, when Orsino asks to see her in her “woman's weeds”. In the source text, dresses are instantly and joyously produced. Here it cannot be *any* dress: it must be Viola's own dress, but the captain has it, and Malvolio has the captain. And so Malvolio is called... And one hundred lines later, when all the subtle cruelty and humiliation of the humorous sub-plot has been revealed and brought to its uneasily comic conclusion (this, along with Orsino's project of violence against Viola, being the chief anxieties which the comic resolution must encounter) and Malvolio has stormed off-stage – only *then* does Orsino remember, and call out: “Pursue him and entreat him to a peace. He hath not told us of the captain yet...”. And so it is that Viola, who has fallen strangely and abruptly silent since the first mention of the dress, finishes the play lost in a strange and ambiguous no-man's (or woman's)-land: not yet Viola, nor the beloved of Orsino.

Cesario, come –
 For so you shall be while you are a man.
 But when in other habits you are seen,
 Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen. (5.1.378-81)

If *Much Ado* is a comedy about scepticism and the masculine violence it arouses, then *Twelfth Night* is a comedy about mourning, playing with the difficult and painful negotiation of self and other, of love and of loss. Both of these plays reach the brink of the realisation that marriage and happy endings are not one and the same thing, and that love is not easily separable from violence, death and the self-love of Narcissus. If *Much Ado* and *Twelfth Night* still manage to end in lovers' meetings, then this is where the next phase of Shakespeare's comic writing *begins*.

All's Well that Ends Well

All's Well that Ends Well is one of only a tiny handful of so-called comedies written between *Twelfth Night* in approximately 1601 and *Pericles* in approximately 1607, the others being the generically-indeterminate *Troilus and Cressida* and the problem comedy *Measure for Measure*.³⁷ All three of these plays display a profound scepticism concerning romantic love and its healing power, taking up the latent uncertainties and anxieties surrounding love and marriage left over by the late comedies and emptying out the idea of a marriage as a panacea for social and personal ills. In displaying such profound uncertainty regarding the power of love and marriage, the plays also exhibit considerable cynicism concerning the power of comedy, and its adequacy to contain, manage and filter these sceptical anxieties.

All's Well is a play that resists generic classification, almost to the same degree that *Troilus* does. It is also one of a small number of Shakespearean dramas which are structured around an extreme polarity or disjunction in the action and mood: other plays which exhibit a comparable shift include *Timon*, *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Whereas the abrupt shift in *Timon* plunges the play into tragedy (with Timon's fall), the disastrous events of *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* (in the former, the loss of Thaisa and Marina, coming after Pericles' uneasy sojourn at the incestuous Antioch court; in the latter the losses of Mamillius, Hermione and Perdita) lead to an abrupt shift in the action; the difficult movement towards a reclaiming of the comic. As a comedy of marriage, *All's Well* effectively stages an entire romance in the course of its first half, compressing it into two acts: unrequited love, trials overcome, a miraculous healing, the bringing-together of a pair of lovers in marriage. Bertram's disastrous response plunges romantic comedy into crisis, leaving Helena to undergo a quest to recuperate him (recalling the quests of fairytale and of myth,

³⁷ No other Shakespeare play suffers from the same degree of generic anxiety as *Troilus and Cressida*. It appears as *The Historie of Troilus and Cressida* in the quarto edition (Q) of 1609, as well as in one of the two entries on the play in the Stationers' Register. The anonymous Epistle to the Reader which precedes the play in Q refers to it as "passing full of the palme comicall", and goes on to refer to the play as a comedy no less than nine times. *Troilus and Cressida* appears among the Tragedies in the First Folio of 1623. F.S. Boas included it among the so-called "problem plays" along with *All's Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet*.

just as *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline* do), to force him back within those comic perimeters.

The bi-partite nature of these four plays draws attention to the jarring generic inconsistencies and juxtapositions in each. As Chapter 1 explores above, *Timon* emerges from a comic and satiric tradition rather than a tragic one, while the strange horrors of incest and violence from which *Pericles* flees, as well as the brothel scenes, sit oddly with that play's romantic ending. The abrupt about-turn performed by *The Winter's Tale* marks the shift from tragedy into comedy, as the next chapter explores. All of these plays sit uneasily within established generic frameworks. The satire of *Timon* contributes to its alienating effect, while deeply problematic moments of violence and rejection jar the comedy of the other three, especially as these plays often make little or no ostensible effort to come to terms with them. This doubleness in *Timon* and *Pericles* may perhaps be partly a function of their collaborative origins: *Timon* being co-authored by Thomas Middleton, while *Pericles* was probably written with George Wilkins. Interestingly, Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith have recently advanced an argument that *All's Well* too is the result of substantial collaboration, tentatively proposing Thomas Middleton as their preferred candidate for co-author. This might certainly go some way towards grounding the play's more grinding cynicism, just as it does in *Timon*. But a theory of collaboration does little to *explain* this doubleness, even though it may do much to explain how this doubleness was achieved. It may even be, as Anthony Dawson and Gretchen Minton speculate in their introduction to the Arden edition of *Timon*, that Shakespeare deliberately sought out Middleton as a collaborator because he recognised in the younger dramatist a talent for a kind of satirical writing for which he himself had less of a gift. Irrespective, it is important to remember, as Maguire and Smith are themselves anxious to emphasise, that the possible presence of two authorial voices within the text cannot, and should not, be used in any way to suggest "weakness", or as an apology for perceived structural flaws. Instead, the "doubleness" of *All's Well* can be seen to form part of a much larger picture: it is entirely characteristic of *tragicomic* writing, and the kind of fascinating generic tensions that help to constitute tragicomedie as a genre. Tragicomedie is emphatically not a simple mixture of tragic and comic writing,

easily separable into their component parts: as Guarini strongly asserts, it emerges increasingly as a genre in its own right. But part of tragicomedy's virtue as a genre is its ability to draw attention to the fissures, making a feature and a virtue of the cracks rather than attempting to cover them over. In this sense, tragicomedy remains profoundly ambivalent, a "jagged" genre (to use McMullan's term), which stages the discomfiting encounter with, and accommodation of, disparate generic elements.

Susan Snyder, a critic who has herself made a significant contribution in scholarship to the study of early modern genres, remarks in her introduction to the Oxford edition of *All's Well* upon the play's generic ambiguity and the disjunction of its two halves, drawing attention to the many critics who have detected in *All's Well* the influence of the folk tale tradition and especially that of the miracle tale or play.

For these, the relevant context one way or another is medieval religious drama. The bed-trick has a model in the mystery plays: its combination of self-humbling and trickery makes sense theologically as a parallel to Christ's outwitting of the devil by taking on human flesh. Miracle plays, especially those in which the Virgin Mary is the mediating force in bringing erring humanity to redemption, offer another generic frame. (41)

Snyder herself agrees that *All's Well* reflects the structure of a morality play, but emphasises that the play's internal dynamics resist such assimilation: the morality play comparison "has value for clarifying structure, if not spiritual significance" (42). She points out that the internal struggle for Bertram's loyalties and allegiances echo less the virtues and vices of the morality dramas (as the good and bad angels of *Doctor Faustus* do, for example) than they do the conflicting claims of fraternity versus romantic love which appear in Shakespeare's previous comedies: Beatrice versus Don Pedro (and Claudio); Antonio versus Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

In taking up something left over by the old religious morality dramas, *All's Well* does more than simply to use them as a frame. As the introductory section to Part III notes, above, medieval religious drama has a special relationship with the emerging genre of early modern tragicomedy: it is itself *tragicomic* in the way in which it maintains human suffering, and the unspoken questions surrounding it, under the as-yet-unfulfilled solemn promise of future translation.

Faith in the morality plays is the key to understanding, but here, in *All's Well*, Bertram's faith is demanded by a figure uncomfortably secular, human and interested, via a bed-trick which is manipulative and a marriage founded on a double public humiliation. The very name of the play is a sceptical statement, encouraging audiences to question the relationship here between ending and journey. *All's Well* can therefore be usefully read as a bridge between the problems of the late comedies – especially those which focus upon the demands of sexual desire, the impending transfer of allegiances from male friendship to heterosexual romantic love, and the rising tensions surrounding scepticism and its anxieties – to the later tragicomedies. *All's Well* sets Shakespeare further along the path to tragicomedy than any of the late comedies: it takes up the generic framework of comedy, both divine and secular, and subjects it to an increasingly sceptical scrutiny, fracturing any remaining vestiges of hope that comedy and its mandates are any longer *enough*. If *All's Well* empties out the idealised notion that marriage is enough, taking up in its second half the problem of marriage in crisis, it also ends on a sceptical note concerning not marriage alone, but childbirth, in the problematic figure of a pregnant wife and mother. The encounter between Bertram and Helena is unseen, but its hiddenness provokes scepticism rather than answering it. Bertram has, after all, been married by force and brought to bed by trickery. At the end of the play, the sceptical question which this reluctant and accidental husband might well articulate, although he never does, might be the one that comes to be articulated for him by Leontes, another sceptical husband in a very different play: to ask on what grounds he should base his faith that this unborn baby, who is to heal the marriage rift so completely, is his at all?

Chapter 6: *The Winter's Tale*

The Winter's Tale is a fascinating generic hybrid, the product of a sustained encounter between tragedy and comedy. One of its features as a tragicomedy is the way in which it plays on audience expectations. The first half of the play, comprising Acts 1-3, seems to be preparing very much for tragedy, whereas the second half, with its long scenes of pastoral festivity, clearly belongs to the genre of comedy. As the early part of this chapter shows, the play takes up and addresses the tragic and nihilistic potential of the same sceptical problematic confronted by the earlier tragedies. In its confrontation of the horrors of *nothing*, which in this instance are also the horrors of tragic scepticism, *The Winter's Tale* is very much a response to *King Lear*. In his groundbreaking work on Shakespearean scepticism and tragedy, *Disowning Knowledge*, Stanley Cavell makes no direct reference, oddly enough, to the fact that just one of his chosen plays is not a tragedy. Yet it can be no coincidence that for sixteen years, until its re-publication in 2003 with the addition of one extra essay, "Macbeth Appalled", the collection opened with the now famous essay on *King Lear*, "An Avoidance of Love", and finished with the essay on *The Winter's Tale*. *The Winter's Tale* is a reworking of *Othello*, but it speaks in answer to *Lear*. And so the question which lies behind this chapter is this: how does tragicomedy, as an aesthetic and dramatic form, allow Shakespeare to take up this sceptical problematic and to find a way of moving through and beyond the claims of tragedy?

The tremendous generic shift between the two halves may in part be traced to the play's reliance on its source material, Robert Greene's popular prose romance *Pandosto* (first published in 1585-88, republished 1592 and renamed *Dorastus and Fawnia* in later editions), which *is*, largely, tragic. *Pandosto* differs from *The Winter's Tale* in several significant respects. One of these is the report of the behaviour of the queen (here "Bellaria") with Pandosto/Leontes' friend (here "Egistus"), which – although Greene makes clear that it is entirely innocent of wrongdoing – displays a far greater degree of intimacy than that of Hermione and Polixenes, suggesting in turn that the king's jealousies are at least more easily explicable.

Bellaria, noting in Egistus a princely and bountiful mind adorned with sundry and excellent qualities, and Egistus, finding in her a virtuous and courteous disposition, there grew such a secret uniting of their affections that the one could not well be without the company of the other; insomuch that when Pandosto was busied with such urgent affairs that he could not be present with his friend Egistus, Bellaria would walk with him into the garden, where they two in private and pleasant devices would pass away the time to both their contents. (157)

Just as *The Winter's Tale* lacks an Iago or a Don John, so it lacks any indications of such a level of familiarity between Hermione and Polixenes, throwing into sharp relief the groundlessness of Leontes' suspicions as that same "groundlessness" into which his scepticism plunges him. The dark world of the sceptic, unstable in every sense of the word, colours this first half, recalling tragedies like *Lear* and *Othello*. But it also recalls the source material again: in Greene's version, the outcome of Pandosto's suspicions is more decisively tragic. Not only does the king's son, Garinter, die as Mamillius does, but Bellaria dies too: the romance lacks a Paulina, or a statue scene, and Bellaria never returns. Not only this, but the flight of Fawnia (Perdita) and Dorastus (Florizel) to Pandosto's court results in a very different reaction in Pandosto than it does in Leontes. Far from proving the mild-mannered peacemaker that Leontes does, Pandosto proves instead a degenerate old rogue who imprisons Dorastus, lusts after Fawnia (thinking her a foreign great lady) and threatens her with rape. On discovering the identities of the pair as prince and "shepherdess" he flies into a rage and threatens violence against her for her presumption, before her identity as his daughter is revealed. This news brings general reconciliation, and "bonfires and shows throughout the citie" in eighteen days of rejoicing. But there is to be one final twist in the tale.

Pandosto... sailed towards Sicilia, where he was most princely entertained by Egistus who, hearing this comical event, rejoiced greatly at his son's good hap, and without delay (to the perpetual joy of the two young lovers) celebrated the marriage. Which was no sooner ended, but Pandosto, calling to mind how first he betrayed his friend Egistus, how his jealousy was the cause of Bellaria's death, that contrary to the law of nature he had lusted after his own daughter, moved with these desperate thoughts, he fell into a melancholy fit, and to close up the comedy with a tragical stratagem, he slew himself; whose death being many days bewailed of Fawnia, Dorastus, and his dear friend Egistus, Dorastus, taking his leave of his father, went with his wife and the dead

corpse into Bohemia where, after they were sumptuously entombed, Dorastus ended his days in contented quiet. (203-04)

Like Sidney's *Arcadia* (itself a potential source for Greene, as well as for Shakespeare), *Pandosto* is a generic hybrid, a space in which tragedy and comedy sit uneasily side-by-side (romance, alongside tragicomedy, being a genre which often incorporates both tragic and comic elements without apparent embarrassment). Even the closing words of Greene's final sentence leave a shadow of ambiguity over the future, the strange "they" seeming jarringly to imply that Dorastus' wife, as well as the corpse of his father-in-law, has been "sumptuously intoombbed" (an impression continued rather than removed by the strange absence of Fawnia from the final phrase regarding Dorastus' happy old age). *Pandosto* is not fully tragic, then, but there is still an enormous discrepancy between its outcome and the ending achieved by *The Winter's Tale*, with the statue scene, the return of Hermione and the reconciliations between Leontes and his remaining family. It reinforces (rather as the discrepancy between *King Lear* and *King Lear* does) the significance of the generic framework within Shakespeare is writing, and the degree to which it helps to shape the encounter between these disparate generic elements. .

I want to digress briefly here to mention a recent production of *The Winter's Tale* by the all-male theatre company Propeller (first produced in 2005 and revived in 2012). Although this thesis is not generally concerned with performance analysis, this production brought out the generic hybridity of the play to particularly heightened effect, with its reversal from tragedy to comedy and an abrupt shift from a very bleak first two acts to the sudden bursting through of light and comedy in the second half, something which is not necessarily characteristic of most modern productions. Propeller's production played generic conventions off against each other in a way that toyed expertly with audience expectations. The first half was almost unrelentingly dark: it featured a brooding king whose mind was very clearly collapsing around him, and a queen who bore suffering and indignity with immense and moving dignity, most notably in the trial scene when "she" appeared still dressed in her bloodstained birthing-gown but otherwise stripped back entirely of everything that might earlier have suggested femininity, even her hair now uncovered and

close-cropped like that of a POW. During the trial scene Propeller's Richard Dempsey, playing Hermione, gave a very fine performance: stripped apart from his bloodied birthing-robe of everything that might have signified femaleness, he was forced to rely on a performance that was heavily physical. While Leontes (Robert Hands) ranted and raved, Dempsey was forced to keep both tone and gesture heavily constrained. The result was a performance of femininity that emphasised Hermione's powerlessness in the face of masculine rage and violence. However, it also lent her dignity and restraint, contrasting with Leontes' instability and making his rage as pitiable as it was dangerous. The production also made a prominent feature of Mamillius, played by an adult male actor in a pair of striped pyjamas; the child's increasing distress at the unfolding action around him added immensely to the pathos of the first half. During the interval of the Propeller production, which had up until that point remained so unrelentingly dark, a fellow theatre-goer, unfamiliar with the play, remarked with puzzlement during the interval that he did not understand whether it was a tragedy or a comedy. We do not know exactly what stage conventions the theatre of Shakespeare's own time might have used – black draperies might have been used to signify a tragedy, or even particular gestures and movements, but these might equally have been drawn upon to mislead and to confuse by their presence, absence or modification, just as Propeller used mood and lighting to create false expectations. Genre was, after all, in a highly fruitful state of flux on the Renaissance stage, genre-bending a common practice, and Shakespeare's own audience might well have experienced very similar confusion while watching the play. However the second half of the play, with its long scenes of pastoral festivity, makes instantly clear that whatever else happens, this play will not end altogether badly. Again, this was something that the Propeller production brought out to great effect. The dark first half may have felt very out-of-keeping with the conventions of comedy, but any expectation of a *tragic* outcome was instantly wiped away when the audience re-entered the theatre after the interval to find a large drum-kit labelled "The Bleatles" sitting on stage. The re-entry of the Shepherd and the Clown along with a chorus of all-singing-all-dancing comedy sheep, who joined Antigonus in a rock-and-roll rendition of the first lines of Act 4 Scene 3 set to music, confirmed the wrenching disjunction of the mood of

the second half from that of the first, effectively turning all expectations of a tragic outcome on their head.

Scepticism opens up a space for tragedy in the first half in a way that some of the earlier comedies flirt with but never fully recognise. This recognition is fully and catastrophically achieved only in the great tragedies, and never more so than in the nihilistic vision of *Timon* and *King Lear*. In the speech on nothing, Leontes' maddened vision of a swelling *nothing* engulfing the world aligns his position with the same deadly, vengeful and ultimately *tragic* scepticism of his earlier prototypes. The kind of sceptical movement that Leontes makes here is tragic because it alienates: it corrodes the grounds of mutuality, as we see in the profound alienation of Timon from the rest of the world, or Lear during his rejection of Cordelia. As Stanley Cavell frames it, the sceptic's problem is not one of knowledge, but of acknowledgement: the sceptic is also a fanatic because of his refusal to accept what everyone else already knows. During the division of the kingdoms in *Lear*, during the trial scene in *The Winter's Tale*, Lear and Leontes are profoundly lonely figures, alienated from the rest of the people surrounding them by the dim sense that something, some terrible knowledge, is escaping them. Both men are truly surrounded by a crowd, all of whom know something that they themselves do not. We see it in Leontes' obsession with *whispering*, the idea that everyone else knows something that he does not: "Is whispering nothing?", he demands, and later on he rips Mamillius violently away from Hermione as the little boy sits whispering in her ear. It is an obsession with private and public: he is desperately concerned that something which should have remained private – his relationship with Hermione – has now been made public.

Many a man there is, even at this present,
Now while I speak this, holds his wife by the arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence
And his pond fish'd by his next neighbour, by
Sir Smile, his neighbour. (1.2.191-95)

Leontes is, of course, wrong about this. His scepticism is partly the general scepticism with which we are still entirely familiar: one may smile, and smile, and be a villain, and how are we to know which smiles are true and which are false? But his scepticism is also the aggravated scepticism of the ruler, the

powerful man, whose fate it is to be constantly surrounded by watching eyes, pointing fingers and whispering tongues, to be kept in the dark himself and never to know which of his confidences are being made public. If Hermione is innocent of making something that is private to Leontes public to Polixenes, then Camillo is not. Fearing Hermione's treachery, Leontes turns to Camillo, placing his trust in his counsellor instead. And Camillo betrays that trust, going straight to Polixenes to warn him of something that will soon become public knowledge. Leontes' terror of whispering, his paranoia that everyone is whispering about something that he does not know about himself, is entirely accurate: he is only wrong about the source and the nature of the whisper. He thinks that the court whispers say that the king is a cuckold, whereas in actual fact they say only that the king is going insane. ("Be Kent unmannerly when Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?").

If scepticism opens up a space for tragedy, then it is the generic form of tragicomedy which somehow finds a way through and past that, via the tremendous shift between the mood of the first half and that of the second. By looking more closely at the origins and source of Leontes' deadly and vengeful scepticism, I want to suggest here a certain reading that allows for more of a direct connection between the two than might at first appear; one that is not confined to the famous discussion of breeding in Perdita and Polixenes' lengthy argument about flowers. Instead, it is possible to read the lengthy pastoral of the second half as in some way an answer to, or a working-through of, some of the most profound anxieties which propel the violent outbreak of tragedy in this play, in a way that allows finally for a resolution which is neither that of *Pandosto* nor that of tragedy.

The immediate source for the pastoral sheep-shearing scenes of *The Winter's Tale* is in *Pandosto*, but an affinity between tragicomedy and pastoral can be found within at least two separate traditions: in the "tragicomic" medieval religious drama, and in the emerging genre of "pastoral tragicomedy" pioneered by Guarini. In keeping with this, a concern with the pastoral appears very early in *The Winter's Tale*, and well before the sheep-shearing scenes. It occurs in Act I, in a speech by Polixenes to Hermione during which he reminisces about the

friendship he and Leontes enjoyed as young boys, harking back to a nostalgic image of a pastoral idyll.

We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' th' sun,
 And bleat the one at th' other: what we chang'd
 Was innocence for innocence: we knew not
 The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
 That any did. Had we pursu'd that life,
 And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd
 With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven
 Boldly 'Not guilty', the imposition clear'd
 Hereditary ours. (1.2.67-75)

The "imposition...hereditary ours" refers to original sin, thus inferring that Polixenes' wistful memory locates boyhood in prelapsarian Eden, as part of a vision of untainted pastoral purity. The landscape of Eden before the Fall and an idealised image of childhood are folded into one another by this image, implied in one another, becoming one single landscape of prelapsarian innocence as yet whole and unstained. Responding to this eulogy, Hermione jokes: "By this we gather/ You have tripp'd since", but Polixenes responds swiftly with an accusation of his own.

O my most sacred lady,
 Temptations have since then been born to's: for
 In those unfledg'd days was my wife a girl;
 Your precious self had not then cross'd the eyes
 Of my young play-fellow. (1.2.76-80)

As in *Much Ado*, this play displays a profound ambivalence here about the competing claims of heterosexual romantic love and sexual desire, and those of male-to-male friendship, this time located in a pre-sexual and prelapsarian state of childhood innocence. The arrival of original sin into this landscape is humorously associated with the discovery of adult sexuality, contingent upon the arrival of temptation in the shape of mature adult women. By implication they bring with them the "imposition hereditary" and "doctrine of ill-doing", "tripping" the boys and dividing them from one another. The loss of Eden, of the pastoral idyll, is a function of these new temptations, this new maturation.

Polixenes' nostalgic pastoral idyll occurs earlier in the same scene in which Leontes' monstrous imaginings begin to swell and grow. This occurs in response to two simultaneous visual stimuli: the sight of his heavily-pregnant

wife interacting with Polixenes in the background, and the contemplation of his own son's childish face. The terms in which his nihilistic vision is later expressed make the imaginative connection clear: if "nothing" echoes the female genitals, female sexuality, then in Hermione's case this is also a *fertile* nothing, swelling and growing into her nine-months' pregnant belly ("no barricado for a belly"), echoed by the monstrous swelling of "nothing" in Leontes' imagination. But what of this other stimulus? As the first signs of his passion are brewing, he looks earnestly at Mamillius' face, responding implicitly to Polixenes' earlier lines with a corresponding memory of his own childhood, but with a more sinister undercurrent.

Looking on the lines
Of my boy's face, methoughts I did recoil
Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreech'd,
In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzl'd
Lest it should bite its master, and so prove,
As ornaments oft do, too dangerous:
How like, methought, I then was to this kernel,
This squash, this gentleman. (1.2.153-60)

What does Leontes see, looking on his boy's face? The innocence of childhood, but not a prelapsarian innocence. His lines take up and respond to Polixenes' earlier pastoral idyll, but his vision of this pastoral innocence is troubled, not serene like that of his friend. "Recoiling" from the ugly horror of his rapidly-swelling adult jealousies and suspicions, Leontes seeks in his son's face the reassurance of Polixenes' pastoral idyll, the memory of an unblemished state of pre-sexual (thus "unbreech'd") and prelapsarian innocence. But here, the image of himself aged five or six is ominously underscored by the threatening hints of an already-present seed of something darker and more adult, something which troubles the serenity of pastoral perfection. This "recoiling" from the present suggests in childhood a spring kept down, waiting to burst forth, while the "dagger muzzl'd" hints at a barely-contained masculine sexual aggression waiting to be unleashed. In Leontes' image the violence is not primarily a danger to others: it is the dagger's owner who is himself menaced by it. The "recoiling", and the bestial hints of something "muzzl'd" lest it should bite, also hint at something snakelike: there is a serpent in Leontes' Eden. If Polixenes' fantasy imagines boyhood as a state of prelapsarian innocence, void of original sin, then Leontes'

uneasy scepticism pierces its status *as* fantasy. It dissolves the pastoral myth of origins, uneasily conscious that the origins of sin and sexuality are to be located, not in a foreign (female) influence, but *within* this pastoral landscape, inherent in the child itself.

Polixenes' pastoral idyll of childhood is troubled by Leontes, and Leontes is troubled by the idyll. His "reading" of Mamillius' face, with its childish hints of the seeds of an already-present knowledge of post-lapsarian, mature understanding, violence and sexual maturity (a knowingness, as we might say), takes place in the foreground, against the backdrop of Hermione and Polixenes' interaction (a reading of which becomes the focus of Leontes' scepticism, the seed from which the nihilistic vision of a world-consuming *nothing* arises). Leontes is sceptical of Polixenes' image: a certain vision of perfect Edenic pastoral, menaced by a disturbing undercurrent of blemish and lurking shadow, haunts the imaginative landscape of these earlier scenes, invested in the face of a child and the pregnant stomach of a woman. This, I want to suggest, is the connection between the apparently disjunct halves of the play: the fear and the horror provoked by this suspect and sceptical image of the pastoral in the first half finds, in some guise, an answer in the brash comedy and raucous humour of the pastoral scenes in the second.

If Polixenes' vision presents a world in which childhood and untroubled male friendship – represented in this vision of pre-sexual childish attachment – are made the grounds for the assertion of prelapsarian innocence, freedom from an *intrinsic* blemish of original sin, then Leontes' horror is born of a guilty knowledge that Polixenes speaks a fantasy. Mamillius' face is the proof of that, just as Mamillius' later precocious conversation with the ladies, and his *whispering* (bearing in mind that Leontes associates whispering with sexual knowingness, as well as with the exposure of *himself*) is also the moment at which Leontes bursts in upon them, wrenching them apart in revengeful rage. Mamillius, who is both the mnemonic location for Leontes' memories of his own childhood, and the unnerving reminder that he inherits at least part of who and what he is from Leontes himself (after all, it is the "sin hereditary"), despite the fantasy that Hermione has too much blood in him ("Art thou my boy?" ... "I am like you, they say"). So that what confronts Leontes here, in the beloved face of his

boy, is the stain of corruption and the collapse of particular myths of origin. ("I was born stainless, it was my natural state, but you have caused me to trip since, with your seductive ways".)

The Winter's Tale is profoundly preoccupied with children and childhood, with concerns about generation and reproduction, right from the beginning of the play when Camillo and Archidamus enter discussing the shared childhood of Leontes and Polixenes and the future hopes invested in their royal young sons. Leontes sees himself in Mamillius, traces himself in the lines of that childish face: "Sweet villain!". And, as his wife and friend observe, he is "unsettled" by it; visibly "moved". If he sees himself there, as he says he does, then what he sees is that same blend of innocence and maturity (the unbreeched little boy; the muzzled dagger) that Mamillius himself displays in conversation. All the pathos of "go play, boy, play", as the child's play becomes mingled with and contaminated by Leontes' ideas of sexual play and dissembling play, emerge in the contrast between the adult imagination of Leontes' muddy and loathsome fantasies, and the exposure of the little boy to something of which he precociously aware, yet only half-understands ("I am like you, they say", he tells Leontes, responding to the spirit rather than the letter of his father's question). But what it means to be like Leontes is to be in a state of sin: corrupt, stained, and – in this play's imagination of the form that this stain takes – coloured with the beginnings of a destructive and jealous sexuality.

This preoccupation continues in the tender little domestic scene, the last one in which Mamillius ever appears, and the last peaceful scene of the play before Leontes erupts in upon it to rip his family apart. The child displays a similar precociousness in the scene with Hermione's ladies, first denying that he is "a baby still", and then proving the truth of this claim by demonstrating his sexual awareness, teasing them "knowingly" about their cosmetically-enhanced faces as they flirt tenderly with him. The powerful imaginative link that the play forges and maintains between Leontes and Mamillius strengthens the implication that it is not only Leontes who is disturbed and made jealous by the sight of the pregnant female body. Gentle and intimate though this scene is, Hermione enters clearly bidding her ladies to remove Mamillius from her: "He so

troubles me, /Tis past enduring". And, responding to Mamillius' taunts, the First Lady teases him in return.

Hark ye:
The Queen your mother rounds apace. We shall
Present our services to a fine new prince
One of these days; and then you'd wanton with us,
If we would have you. (2.1.15-19)

Leontes may see hints of it in Mamillius' face, but he is not the first: St. Augustine perceived it too in a passage from the *Confessions* that has since become famous, finding the marks of original sin in the silent jealousy of one infant for another. For in your sight, he says, no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived one day on earth.

I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy. This much is common knowledge. Mothers and nurses say that they can work such things out of the system by one means or another, but surely it cannot be called innocence, when the milk flows in such abundance from its source, to object to a rival desperately in need and depending for his life on this one form of nourishment? Such faults are not small or unimportant, but we are tender-hearted [.] (28)

If this play is a tale, a winter's tale, it belongs to Mamillius. That poignant scene, the last in which this strange and sad little boy will ever appear, is the scene in which he begins to tell his mother a story.

Hermione. Come, sir, now
I am for you again. Pray you sit by us,
And tell's a tale.
Mamillius. Merry or sad shall't be?
Hermione. As merry as you will.
Mamillius. A sad tale's best for winter. I have one
Of sprites and goblins.
Hermione. Let's have that, good sir.
Come on, sit down; come on, and do your best
To fright me with your sprites; you're pow'rfull at it.
Mamillius. There was a man-
Hermione. Nay, come, sit down; then on.
Mamillius. Dwelt by a churchyard- I will tell it softly;
Yond crickets shall not hear it.
Hermione. Come on then,
And give't me in mine ear. (2.1.12-32)

“A sad tale’s best for winter”. So we are watching a winter’s tale, and Mamillius is whispering a winter’s tale, and so we are led imperceptibly towards the implication that these two tales may be one and the same, that the imagined world of terrifying darkness, and of lightness and comedy, may be the world of Mamillius’ imaginations – the tragicomic imagination of a *child*, with all the casual violence and easy horror of a fairytale. A winter’s tale from a child’s imagination, then: an innocent imagination, but one full of half-understood hints about adult sexualities and adult passions and jealousies; an imagination confronted with the pregnant and distracted body of a mother, and the teasing promise of transferred loves and loyalties. A tale of a family ripped apart, but in which the teller is the only one to vanish forever, never to return.

This sublimated, fairytale quality is part of the essence of what is truly *tragicomic* about *The Winter’s Tale*. It is here that the most famous stage direction in Shakespeare occurs: *Exit, pursued by a bear*. The bear is straight out of fairytale, and it takes its place in a tale of casual horrors and mock violence, narrated with black comedy by another profoundly childish figure, the Clown.

O, the most piteous cry of the poor souls! Sometimes to see 'em, and not to see 'em; now the ship boring the moon with her mainmast, and anon swallowed with yeast and froth, as you'd thrust a cork into a hogshead. And then for the land service- to see how the bear tore out his shoulder-bone; how he cried to me for help, and said his name was Antigonus, a nobleman! But to make an end of the ship - to see how the sea flap-dragon'd it; but first, how the poor souls roared, and the sea mock'd them; and how the poor gentleman roared, and the bear mock'd him, both roaring louder than the sea or weather. (3.3.88-99)

It is a grotesque moment, recalling the grotesque yet unreal violence of children’s stories, a moment full of the “giggles and shudders” that Mukherji and Lyne, in common with Ros King, see as its affective crux (5). Tragicomedy maintains extremes of emotion – horror, rage, passion, and love – within boundaries, just as fairytales do. It is a moment that effectively enfolds and draws together the laughter and shudders, pathos and bathos, which help to make this winter’s fairytale so quintessentially tragicomic.

This symbiotic relationship between laughter and shivers makes up a great part of what renders this play tragicomic. But they do not render it a *tragicomedy*; that is, they have little to do with the form of the play. The generic

shift between the first and second halves comes much closer to tragicomedy here, altering the course of tragedy and averting it into comedy. It is this tragicomic form that allows *The Winter's Tale* to accomplish what it does in taking up the sceptical problematic left over by tragedy and moving beyond it, and it does this in and through a vision of the pastoral that takes up and responds to the scepticism which the first half expresses concerning Polixenes' idyllic myth of the pastoral, the myth of origins. If *The Winter's Tale* opens with a vision of pastoral bliss which the sceptical gaze uncovers as fantasy with accompanying rage and disappointment, the second half stages a very *different* vision of pastoral. The tremendous shift that occurs between the first and second halves moves from the tension surrounding sexuality and pregnancy in the first half to the brash, bawdy, joyous and sometimes raucous comic energy of the second. As an answering vision of the pastoral, this extraordinarily earthy vision is far removed from the "weak spirits" of Polixenes' pastoral idyll. The anarchic figure of Autolycus, sly and quick-witted with his smutty songs and his mischievous energy, inherits all the abandon of Richard III without the malice; all the joy of Falstaff without the decrepitude. The shepherdesses, Dorcas and Mopsa, are no shy virgins but earthy and forthright countrywomen: Dorcas jibing at Mopsa for her foul breath and teasing her about her preference for the Clown; Mopsa retaliating with a sly jest implying that the Clown has impregnated Dorcas. The foolishness of the Shepherd and the Clown brings out the unsophisticated innocence of this pastoral scene, with all its joyous abandon and vigorous comic energy, superbly underscored by the unembarrassed, earthy tone and the bawdy insults of the shepherdesses.

This lengthy scene effectively acts to reclaim and regenerate a vision of the pastoral which is crucially *different* from the one Polixenes describes, and which Leontes finds wanting because blemished and tainted by the detection of an always already-present stain of hereditary sin. This pastoral setting is both innocent and knowing: the shepherdesses are foul-mouthed and raucous; the shepherds simple to the point of idiocy; Autolycus an unmitigated rogue; but despite this, and running through it, is a kind of knowing simplicity that finds a strange blend of innocence and experience. This vision is redemptive precisely because it answers Leontes' rigid horror with a reclaiming of what in Cavellian

terms we might call the grounds of the ordinary – the commonplace, the everyday, the earthy, the human, everything that was not previously enough for Leontes. It does not aspire to the transcendent, but remains resolutely in and of the world, imperfect, rough and unapologetic. It answers Leontes' previously polarised vision – the *all* of prelapsarian perfection and wholeness, or the world-consuming horror of *nothing* – with the claims of the ordinary: “something”.

Earlier on, this chapter discussed the significance of medieval Christian drama for an understanding of the shape and trajectory of tragicomedy. *The Winter's Tale* is, I want to suggest, very much a play in this tradition: its tragicomic form inherits a great deal from the form of the old medieval religious dramas – dramas which draw, as Benjamin remarks, upon the medieval chronicles and their understanding of postlapsarian history itself. Benjamin finds in *Trauerspiel* plays expressing mournfulness, plays for the mournful: implicit in them, for him, is the figure of Durer's *Melancholia*, and the melancholy emblems of the medieval contemplative tradition. It is here, in this context, that Guarini's theory that tragicomedy purges melancholy begins finally to resonate. Tragicomedy is a peculiarly disparate genre, but implicit in the form of any tragicomedy is a serious recognition of, and encounter with, the form of tragedy and the claims of the tragic, on the journey to a comic resolution. In this sense, it implies a movement forward, and away from, the kind of melancholic stasis of time in which *Richard II* finds its end.

Scepticism, as these plays have it, expresses a profound state of melancholia for something lost. The play's early summoning of the pastoral looks back mournfully to a state of prelapsarian perfection and wholeness, before the Fall, when knowledge was unity, and word and thing were one. The fracturing of the integrity of this image sees it relegated to an impossible myth of origins, displaced by the always already-present fact of original sin. Scepticism is a product of the Fall, because the Fall brings with it the sundering of word from object, and thus a distance opens up between the available knowledge of a thing and the thing itself. There can no longer be perfect unity and knowledge between self and other, self and the world. Language, as Benjamin remarks, becomes irredeemably fallen: it is here that he locates *Trauerspiel* and its “torrent” of language, in amongst the ruins, in the fragments and shards of words. But the

fallenness of language, as Benjamin finds it, does not empty it of use or of significance: even in the ruins of language can be found a memory of the divine language of creation, in which word and thing were one.

Scepticism is the habit of mind that scrutinises the available grounds of knowledge and casts them into doubt. In Cavell's powerful reading, the sceptical movement or response that tragedy makes is to deny the adequacy or satisfaction of these available grounds, to find the ordinary and everyday forms of knowledge wanting and to express this disappointment in the form of a world-shaking revenge ("Why then, the world is nothing"). Like Benjamin, Cavell places language at the heart of this encounter: Benjamin finds in these ruined fragments of language, imperfect and inadequate as they are, archaeological echoes of the unified, and unifying divine language. Cavell finds in the sceptical movement a disappointed and violent rejection of language as the grounds of knowledge, of world and other. And so he reads in scepticism a profound alienation, a withdrawing from the available grounds of mutuality, a turning of the body to stone. It is the *tragic* response: the total and impossible alienation that we find in the response of *Timon of Athens* following the failed attempt to find total unity with the other expressed in a failed and violent attempt to consume and cannibalise that other, to take the other into oneself completely – a response that echoes the stasis of melancholy.

Tragicomic form allows the play to mourn the fracturing and loss of the pastoral through its reframing of pastoral perfection as the rough and joyous scenes of sheep-shearing. But it does not finish here: it moves beyond them to the place where the play ends, in the strange and complex statue scene. When Paulina - and we hear in her name the echo of St. Paul - addresses Leontes, she tells him that she will make the statue move. But first, she tells him: "It is required,/ You do awake your faith" (5.3.94-95). And the music strikes up at her command, and the statue moves. What does it mean, for Leontes to awake his faith? In some way, this scene is addressing a problem of faith, of belief, of knowledge and of scepticism. And it does it in and through the medium of theatre, through this deeply, self-consciously theatrical scene in which as Leontes gazes on the statue he says nervously that he is mocked with art, that should he gaze on it longer, he might come to believe that it moved. The scene recalls the

old religion; there are Marian echoes in Hermione as the loving mother before whom Perdita kneels to ask blessing, half-fearfully denying the charge of idolatry and naïvety as she says defensively: "Give me leave,/ And do not say 'tis superstition that/ I kneel, and then implore her blessing" (5.3.42-44). Nostalgic, perhaps even longing echoes of an older religious tradition of faith in saints and miracles, before the Reformation cast them into such acute doubt, survive as the moving Hermione-statue recalls popular traditions of miraculously moving religious statues. I also want to suggest that *The Winter's Tale* draws upon and echoes an older form of tragicomic drama, the medieval mystery and miracle plays, in which scenes of wonder and transformation play an equally significant role. I am thinking particularly here of plays like the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, in which absolutely spectacular and miraculous transformations are staged - here, the translation of a stage prop, a piece of bread, into the body of the actor playing Christ. Such scenes as this were didactic, designed to help the faithful to awake their faith and to overcome their scepticism about religious mysteries, yet they contain in themselves strong echoes of the kinds of scepticism that they work to combat. They worked by providing a visual and mnemonic referent for transubstantiation which the faithful could recall and draw upon when kneeling in church, taking the Sacrament and exposed to all the temptations of scepticism when asked to believe that the substance of the Host had undergone an absolute change, despite the lack of change in its appearance. But in *The Winter's Tale* - in *this* scene, in *this* tragicomedy - something very *different* occurs. Rather than providing its audience with a staged miracle to support their belief in the miraculous, this scene emphatically denies that any such miracle has taken place. Whatever we might think, Paulina says, she has *not* brought Hermione back to life from a statue: it is only pretend. No miracle, we are told, has taken place despite what we might wish to believe: if a miracle occurs here then it is a secular and theatrical one, rather than a religious miracle. And yet, emotionally, visually and theatrically, the idea of a statue brought magically back to life makes far more sense than the idea that Hermione has somehow been living in hiding for sixteen years, and that she and Paulina have simply been waiting, watching Leontes suffer cruelly while still keeping silence on their secret. It is incomprehensible that she should have done this, and yet we

have to accept it. What the scene asks us to do is to suspend our disbelief, to have faith by accepting that Hermione *is* here, that we know she is, even though it does not make sense and once again there are unspoken and unanswered questions.

Reading this scene in dialogue with Cavell's understanding of scepticism as something that destroys the grounds of mutuality, something that alienates, Sarah Beckwith argues that it takes up the language of the mass, restoring the mutuality that emerges from the Church as the body of Christ, the living community of believers. For Beckwith, forgiveness becomes the grounds on which mutual acknowledgement and reconciliation can be achieved: *The Winter's Tale*, along with *Pericles*, *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*, are "post-tragic" in their recognition of the importance of second chances, which tragedy refuses. Such a reading can, I think, allow us to think further about the place and role of theatre in this scene. Stanley Cavell suggests that religion and theatre are in competition here, but Beckwith's reading suggests rather that theatre takes up the language of the mass, fractured and damaged by the scepticism of the Reformation and appropriates it for the restoration of grounds of mutuality: a living community of believers. Theatre, after all, was always a crucial and intrinsic part of medieval Catholicism. The mystery and miracle plays are simply a continuation of a theatricality with which the rites and ceremonies of the mass were infused. The scepticism of the Reformation worked, in effect, to deny the place of theatre within religion, as a medium in and through which this unity could be achieved. The final scene of *The Winter's Tale* reasserts the place of theatre at the heart of this reconciliatory action. One of the traditions that it seems to draw upon is that of affective piety, but again it reinterprets and reframes this for its own ends. The tradition becomes inverted, as the body of the statue itself responds, quickening to living flesh. Instead of the body of the believer responding to Christ, what we have in this scene is something that takes place fundamentally on the level of the human; something reciprocal. It forms part of the work of mourning by recognising the other; acknowledging her. It responds to Derrida's impossible mourning by recognising the other's otherness, and in that sense letting her go, while simultaneously restoring the grounds on which she can be *recognised*; that is, the grounds of mutuality.

The play takes up the mystery and miracle play tradition but interprets it in its own, very secular way, to a faith that is not blind but depends upon the suspension of disbelief. Genre comes before scepticism, pre-empting it into a new aesthetic frame in which it can be addressed. The tragicomic framework allows this trajectory to occur through a scene which is touched with wonder and with strangeness. In common with many, although by no means all tragicomedies, this scene of revelation is to some degree unforeseen, working its wonder as much on the audience as on Leontes. Whereas in *Much Ado* we know that Hero is not dead and expect her return, here we do not know that Hermione is alive (or perhaps I should say that we do not know for certain that she is not dead). I believe that the probable doubling of Mamillius and Perdita plays a very important part here, first in the creation of wonder and then in the achievement of an ending which is in the truest sense *tragicomic*. During the second half of the play we *know* that Perdita lives and will be found, thus we potentially *know* how the play will achieve its comic ending. But an early modern audience might also have *known* that in *Pandosto* only Fawnia returns, and that Pandosto commits suicide. Any audience will also *know* by this time that Antigonus has already died graphically and horribly, that Leontes has suffered bitterly under the lash of his conscience and the lash of Paulina's tongue. Furthermore, the doubling of Mamillius with Perdita supports the assumption we are asked to make that Mamillius has died, by making it less likely that he will reappear on stage. In this sense, there seems to be no particular expectation before the mention of the statue that Hermione will live again. This means that the scene is infused with additional wonder, as the audience share in the revelation, are asked as Leontes is to awake their faith without warning. And yet, just as something about the medieval religious dramas is often profoundly in excess of comedy, so here the final scene is truly tragicomic, in that some things are left unaccounted for, unspoken. Sixteen years of suffering are not negated; nor are Hermione's wrinkles; nor, beyond everything, is that dead boy who never comes back, who haunts the end of this play with the possibility of a return that is never realised. If the return of Hermione bursts upon us with wonder, it also leaves us suddenly looking around expectantly for the statue of Mamillius, realising only belatedly

that he is already on stage in the person of Perdita, that he cannot come back again.

Epilogue: The Promised End?

Kent. Is this the promised end?

Edgar. Or image of that horror?

(*King Lear* 5.3.261-62)

“Is this the promised end”? Kent’s anguished question returns *King Lear* to one of its fundamental problems, which is also one of the original questions behind this thesis: where does tragedy find its end, and what might that end look like? Like *Timon of Athens* the play is marked by its vision of absolute nihilism; the total catastrophe of its ending. But it is also sceptical about the very possibility of an end to tragedy, giving voice to Edgar’s anguished cry “The worst is not/ So long as we can say ‘This is the worst’” (4.1.29-30). That same scepticism that a way can be found to move beyond and escape the horrors of tragedy is expressed in other Shakespearean tragedies: in the sleepless Macbeth’s envy of Duncan in his grave, or in Hamlet’s dread of “something after death” (3.1.78). As Leontes’ speech “Why then the world, and all that’s in’t, is nothing” (1.2.293), the resonant *nothing* towards which *Lear* and *Timon* both move arises out of an abyss of sceptical uncertainty that threatens to swallow up the world. The influence of the sharp rise of Renaissance scepticism – which Richard Popkin terms an European crisis – manifests itself across the English Renaissance stage in many guises, including both comic and satiric drama. But in the kind of vision staged by plays like *Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale*, the encounter with scepticism is anguished, crisis-laden, and fully tragic.

For critic George Steiner, tragedy’s endings are marked by their fatal inevitability, so that tragedy dies as an art form only when its catastrophes no longer seem unavoidable.³⁸ But in exploring and reworking the same problematic of tragic scepticism across the genres, with very different results, Shakespeare’s work casts tragedy’s inevitability into question. If the dramaturgy of plays like *King Lear*, *Timon of Athens* or even *Coriolanus* tells us something about tragic inevitability, it speaks with most urgency of how tragedy itself may *come to be* inevitable. The great movement from *all* to *nothing* is a tragic one, but it also reveals the tendency of one particular mode of sceptical thought to cast the world in polarised and binary terms, reaching in childlike fear and desire for

³⁸ See Introduction to Part I, pp. 25-31.

the world's *all* before responding with violent terror and rage to the inevitable disappointment at that world's remoteness. What this mode of tragedy stages, then, is a sceptical crisis generated by a failed act of appropriation: the desire to give and to have all that translates an act of knowing into an act of possession. And it reveals the violent and nihilistic response of the sceptic as an act of excommunication, in which such a world is violently repudiated for its inadequate availability – “I banish you!” (*Coriolanus* 3.3.123). Through such an act of excommunication language itself is silenced. In *Lear*, the possibility of speech becomes an animal howl echoing within a final and unresponsive silence. In *Timon*, language ends with a curse.

By allowing tragedy to be encountered within alternative versions of what in Rosalie Colie's important description are termed “a set of interpretations, of ‘frames’ or ‘fixes’ on the world” (*Resources* 8), genre allows it to be recast and re-illuminated, suggesting alternative possibilities. Developing the new genre of the history play, which frequently blends sharply contemporary political scepticism with traces of the old morality dramas, *Richard II* explores a different mode of tragedy from the one represented by *King Lear* – tragedy as melancholy; tragedy as *Trauerspiel*. Drawing on the narrative of the Fall, perhaps directly or indirectly on the old religious theatrical traditions, Shakespeare scrutinises again the same sceptical problematic, which as in *Lear* reaches its climax in the trope of a sovereign world reduced to “nothing”. Here he dramatises the sceptical experience of separateness at the world's withdrawal in terms of the loss of Eden and the unavailability of the divine “beyond”, revealing historical life as a process of mourning. In its encounter with tragic scepticism *Richard II* asks how the act of taking up the place of historical subject in such an uncertain world is to be negotiated, when the realm beyond the self – whether imagined as God, the world, or the other – seems increasingly unavailable and withdrawn. A sense of history's endlessness is fundamental to Shakespeare's development of the genre, and this generic frame allows the sceptical problematic to be explored differently. If tragedy stages the end to all things, then history lingers mournfully on, trapped in an increasingly immanent world. How, in such a world, is communion once more to be established when there is no longer any certainty in the capacity of words and actions to be meaningful, to resonate beyond themselves? In this way

speaking seems akin to an act of faith, as words echo out of context and out of the speaker's understanding.

Early in Shakespeare's career, his history play *King John* suggests that the project of English nationalism responds directly to the excommunication of England by Rome. This is not explicitly the case in *Henry V*, but it is nonetheless a play that self-consciously attempts to establish a sense of community in its audience via the construction of a common narrative of origin and a shared nostalgia for the few: "we happy few, we band of brothers"! (4.3.60). But if history suggests that mourning might provide a mode in which to perform and thus live out the call to take up the position of subjects, then it also reveals how this melancholic mode can also become a performance, not of communion but of what Cavell would call "avoidance". In the sceptical voices of Michael Williams and Pistol, in the fates of all its many victims both English and French, *Henry V* exposes the degree to which such nationalist nostalgia here depends on a collective refusal to recognise on what acts of violence and appropriation the audience's nostalgic sense of community is founded. *Henry V* is emphatically not a tragedy, but its triumphal conclusion comes at a price. The visible traces of sceptical uncertainty still visible in its celebration of the past raises questions about the degree to which recognising history's victims might risk unravelling the kind of fragile community, the fragile articulation of a "we", which history plays initially seem designed to construct.

Shakespearean tragedy frequently articulates an imaginative longing for a state of wholeness, of certainty. We find it in the fantasy of "all" in *Lear* and in *Timon*, as well as in the desperate desire to find order and pattern: a "cause in nature" for hard hearts; gods who are just (*King Lear* 3.6.73; 5.3.168). History articulates something very similar in its melancholic consciousness of lost myths of originary wholeness: omnipotent sovereignty with direct access to the divine; Eden lost; an English national golden age. Such a longing appears once again in Shakespearean tragicomedy. In *The Winter's Tale* it appears as a fantasy of a prelapsarian pastoral idyll; in *Cymbeline* (not fully discussed here), something comparable occurs in the raging sceptic Posthumus' dreamlike vision of finding his origins in a stable, primarily masculine family unit in which maternal power is subdued and contained. In this way, tragicomedy celebrates and mourns for

just such a state of wholeness, of meaningfulness, as the tragedies and histories. Part of the value of exploring the way that history explores the tragic within a different generic frame is in the discovery that history offers an alternative to the nihilistic finality of tragedy's ending, and that this alternative is offered in a kind of endlessness, played out through a mode of mourning. This mode is one that is not without its problems (the frozen and solipsistic melancholy of *Richard II*; the collective act of avoidance in *Henry V*). But it also offers a potentially illuminating way to reconsider the movement beyond tragedy that occurs in tragicomedy, especially in view of Guarini's suggestive remark that tragicomedy frees its hearers from melancholy.

Asking, as Part III of this thesis does, how Shakespeare achieves the movement from tragedy to tragicomedy is to ask once again about tragedy's ending. When Shakespeare's writing turns to tragicomedy, we find in his development of this newly-emerging dramatic genre an explicit reworking of the catastrophic sceptical crises of the earlier tragedies; a frame in which the nihilistic potential of tragedy can be recognised with a fullness and seriousness not available within the earlier comedies. But tragicomedy also takes up the growing anxiety visible in those later comic plays about the power of the comic genre itself to contain sceptical anxieties within the framework of marriage. *The Winter's Tale* reworks *Lear*, but it also reworks comedy, emptying out the illusion of marriage as a panacea for all ills. Happy endings, as *The Winter's Tale*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Cymbeline* might also remind us, are rarely endings at all. If comedy offers the potential for happy resolution, tragicomedy is more sceptical. In its profound uncertainty about marriage as a final end-point, Shakespearean tragicomedy suggests that marriage requires a process of ongoing recognition, of re-negotiation.

Tragicomedy, as the introduction to Part III discusses, is a disparate genre and one that draws in its blending of tragic and comic modes on a number of different traditions. There are traces and echoes of the old medieval religious dramas visible in *The Winter's Tale*, but these are as much a matter of form as of content, and they offer further insight into the question of endings. The medieval mystery cycles dramatise the process of historical life before but also, importantly, *after* the coming of Christ. The significance of this event, its

resolution of previous conflicts and its profound implications for mankind, is crucial. But it nonetheless signals an ending that is not yet completed. Life continues on (as we are reminded, for example, in the early scenes of *The Second Shepherds' Play*, in which the harsh, comically fallen world of the shepherds before the nativity is filled with premature references to the birth of Christ as an event that has already happened). The nativity is the first coming, the first resolution, but the end of the cycle looks forward to the second coming of Christ as the bridegroom. In moving beyond the nihilism of tragedy, tragicomedy also moves beyond the easy resolution of comedy; Shakespearean tragicomedy usually ends not in marriage but in a negotiation of remarriage with its painful recognition of imperfection and of permanent loss.

If Kent's anguished question returns to the problem of tragedy's promised end, Edgar's aestheticizing response immediately reminds us how art (like tragedy itself, as the introduction to Part I discusses; like mourning too, as history shows) can serve to distance and displace the sufferings of others, as a means of avoidance rather than providing a point of mutual encounter. In reworking *Lear*, *The Winter's Tale* also tentatively explores again the power of theatre at its conclusion, exploring the statue scene as a re-encounter with the living and breathing body of the other. Here, theatre offers no perfect resolution or direct means of communication, but rather a troubled and uncertain movement beyond the nihilistic finality of tragedy; in hesitant speech rather than in the final and unresponsive silence of *Lear*. Inasmuch as it sees in art and in theatre the possibility of a return of the other, of a statue coming to life, this movement is dependent upon the ability of the sceptic to diminish, to allow himself to be brought into the presence of the other, permitting himself to be displaced rather than shaping her in his desired image. It is one of the differences between *The Winter's Tale* and *Pygmalion*.

FINIS

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